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FRANK THORNE'S RED SONJA® ART EDITION

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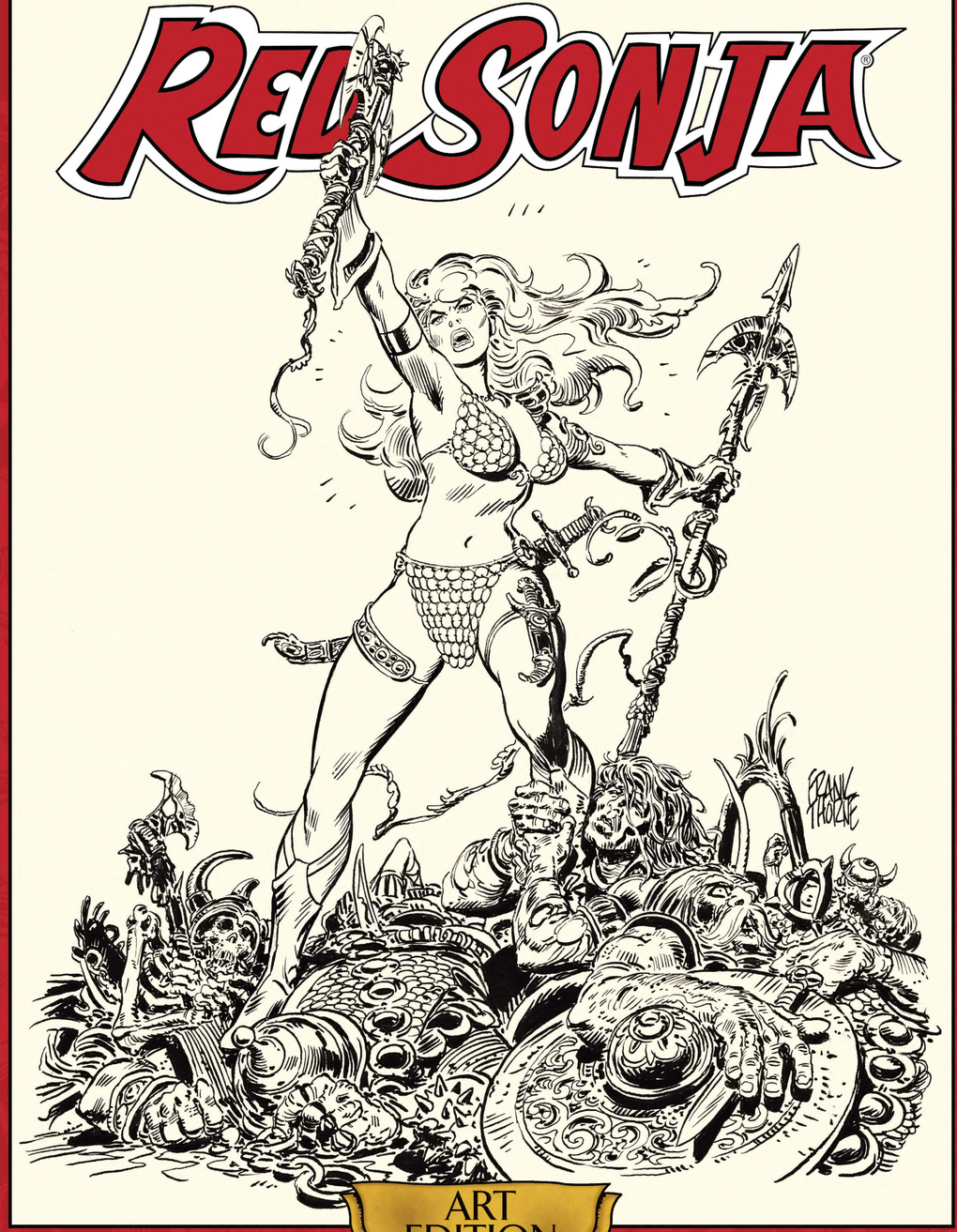
FRANK THORNE'S RED SONJA®



ART EDITION

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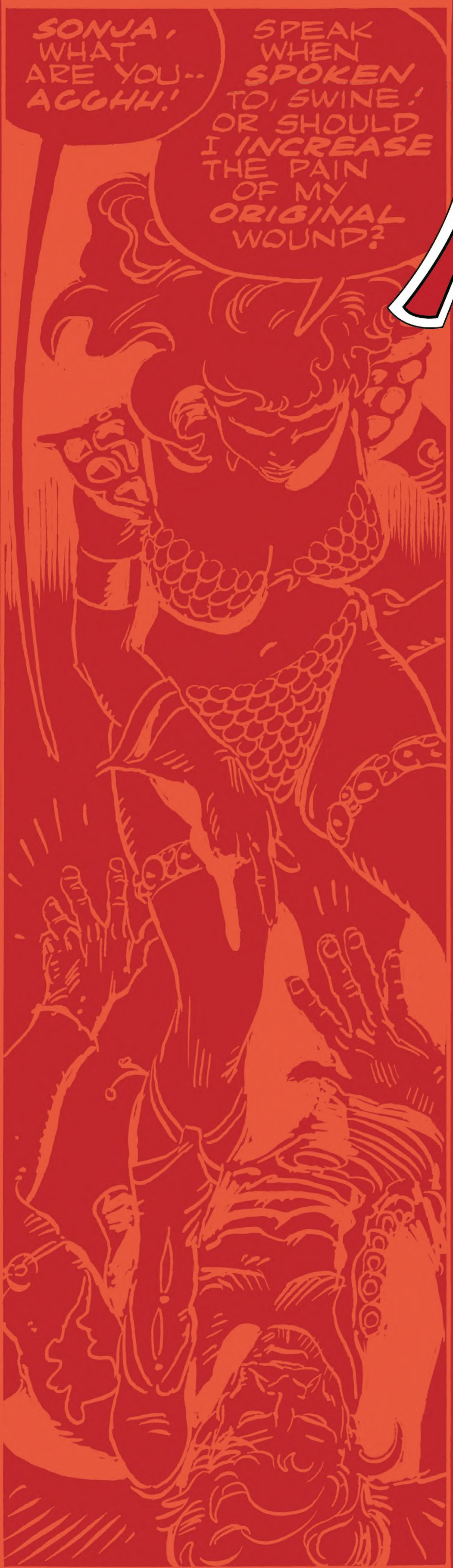
FRANK THORNE'S RED SONJA®

ART EDITION

FRANK THORNE

began his career in comics in 1949, penciling romance comics for Standard Comics. He drew the Perry Mason newspaper strip for King Features, plus a multitude of stories for Flash Gordon, Jungle Jim, Green Hornet, and many more. However, his most remembered stories are those he did for Red Sonja, the iconic swordswoman from Robert E. Howard's Conan mythos. Thorne's stint illustrating Red Sonja's adventures in the Marvel Feature comic series led to a successful ongoing solo series— which had a much celebrated run from 1976 to 1979. By establishing Red Sonja as a ferocious and beautiful female barbarian in a chainmail bikini, Thorne's artwork launched the character into becoming a popular fantasy archetype.



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COLLECTION DESIGN BY JOSH JOHNSON

REMASTERED PAGES BY MIKE KELLEHER AND JOSH JOHNSON

SPECIAL THANKS TO MARK MCNABB

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A Thorne In My Side

A Personal Reflection by Roy Thomas

Does anybody out there remember the old Reader's Digest?

I don't know if that magazine still carries it, but there used to be a popular feature in each issue titled "The Most Unforgettable Character I Ever Met"—or words to that effect.

I suspect I'm not the only person on Earth who could've written one of those columns about Frank Thorne.

Now, understand—I don't know Frank all that well. Never did. In fact, he was only a fuzzy name to me on the 1975 day that someone—either the Marvel Comics editor-in-chief currently occupying that seat in those days when we were all playing "musical thrones," or maybe production manager John Verpoorten—suggested him to me as the new artist of the new book-length "Red Sonja" feature I was writing and editing for Marvel Feature.

I knew Thorne had been the illustrator of Gold Key's Mighty Samson series, which had had just a bit of the Conan/sword-and-sorcery feel I was looking for... and I rather liked it... so I said, fine by me.

Little did I know what I was getting myself, and the world of comics, into!

Up to that point, Marvel's Red Sonja—a permutation of a heroine called Red Sonya (yes, with a "y") that I had run across in one of Robert E. Howard's non-Conan adventure yarns—had been drawn by several artists already associated with Conan himself.
Barry Smith (soon to be Windsor-Smith) had designed her when he and I had adapted that Robert E. Howard story, "The Shadow of the Vulture," giving her a chain-mail shirt and what amounted to red "hot-pants"; loved the shirt, hated the pants, but I let it go.

Later, Spanish illustrator Esteban Maroto had sent in a pin-up of Big Red clad her in peekaboo armor that revealed more than it concealed or shielded. I liked that so much that I decided it should be adapted as Sonja's future apparel.

So Big John Buscema did his own riff on the Maroto version for her second guest appearance opposite Conan. He made the thing work, and Sonja finally had her "look," as far as I was concerned. (As far as most readers were concerned, too, I'd soon learn.) I gave her a line or two of dialogue that explained her rationale for wearing armor that tantalized more than it protected. Some readers, not all of them female, hurled vilifications at me for that; but I figured that, even taking into account the considerable Robert E. Howard content of the warrior woman, Red Sonja was more my creation than theirs, so I ignored them. Let them make up their own "she-devil with a sword" if they wanted to make their own notion of a feminist out of her. I still think that. Strongly.

When he drew the new story in the first issue of Marvel Feature, Dick Giordano naturally followed John's lead. But Dick was too busy with other obligations to continue the strip on a regular basis. So was Gil Kane, who penciled the cover of MF #1.

So—enter Frank Thorne!

I don't recall if the two of us ever met in person in my few months remaining in New York before I moved to L.A. in mid-1976. I was too busy with various things, including the ending of my seven-year marriage, to devote myself to Sonja as I'd originally intended. Something had to give, so I asked a talented young acquaintance of mine, Bruce Jones, to write a few issues of the mag until I could dive back in. Bruce had been writing and drawing some thoughtful, Al-Williamsoneque stories for my black-&-white comic Unknown Worlds of Science Fiction... and he came through with some fine, moody scripts, though he always knew it would be a temporary gig. Since he wrote full scripts in advance, not in what was then called "Marvel style" (plot first, then pencils, then dialogue), the first I really saw of Frank's Red Sonja—though he may well have turned in a sample sketch that I've forgotten and wish I hadn't—was when the finished artwork for Marvel Feature #2, "Blood of the Hunter," found its way to the desk I still had at the Marvel offices.

I was knocked out! Yes, there was perhaps a bit more of a sex kitten, sensuous-Barbie look to Sonja than I had expected. But Frank made it work. Probably part of the reason it worked is because Frank did the whole package. He penciled, he inked, he even lettered. Bruce had given him a script (I don't recall if I saw it before it was drawn or not, though I probably did) that started out with a four-panel splash page, followed by nine panels on each of the next two pages, and seven or eight each on the next several pages after that—plus a fair amount of captions and dialogue, which Frank lettered a bit larger than, say, one of the Rosen brothers would have. But between what Bruce wrote and what Frank drew, the story pulled you in. It had a sort of artsy intensity, if that's not a contradiction in terms.

Skimming through that first issue before I got down to a serious read, I was struck by the way Frank divided up his panels. He was happy to omit panel borders entirely, if it worked for the story. When Sonja stole a horse, she galloped off as she and her mount spilled over into panels above, to the right, and below her—the kind of storytelling that my publisher and mentor Stan Lee didn't like, but never bothered me at all, along as the storytelling was clear. On page 4, she rides hard down the left side of the page after her quarry—and a branch that begins in panel 4 knocks her prey off his mount in panel 5. The aerial POV of the aftermath of the bloody slaughter at an inn on page 5 was so effective that it didn't matter that much of the scene was obscured by the three panels that came after; you had already seen all that you needed to. As had Sonja, in a tall panel that only needed to show one of her eyes to get across her feeling of horror.

And on and on, throughout the rest of the issue!

By the time I'd finished reading and editing Marvel Feature #1, there was no doubt in my mind: Frank Thorne had the Red Sonja berth for as long as he wanted it!

Frank delivered on the covers, too. He filled every square inch, every square centimeter, with something interesting to the eye. (Carmine Infantino would have said that Frank's drawings "irritated" the eye—but he'd have meant that in a good sense.) Not that there isn't a case to be made, as well, for leaving pregnant blank spaces in artwork—but this was Frank's approach, and he made it work for him, just as he had the panel breakdowns. There's never been a better Red Sonja drawing, in my humble opinion, than the cover of Marvel Feature #4, which is Thorne's homage (of a sort) to Frank Frazetta's very first Conan illustration, the cover of the Lancer edition of Conan the Adventurer.

Frank and Bruce made a wonderful team, with Balek the mechanical golem and the savage Bear-God spread over those four fierce issues. I almost felt guilty coming back in and yanking Sonja away from Bruce—but his scripting stint had always been a limited run, and he knew it.

There was a subtle—or maybe not so subtle—change in Frank's storytelling once I took charge with MF #6. Since I was giving him only a several-page synopsis to work from, not a full script, there was no need—and no desire on my part—for him to draw so many panels a page. But Frank was no less creative. He gave me a wonderful Karanthes, priest of Ibis—a Messantia to rival anything that John Buscema was doing around the same time over in Conan the Barbarian—and I think we both enjoyed taking those then-current urban myths about blind, albino alligators in the New York City sewer system and turning them into a menace out of shadow-haunted Stygia. What's more, over the next couple of months, Frank more than held his own as Sonja's storyline merged with that of Conan and his pirate queen Belit. I particularly enjoyed Sonja and Conan's battle with a

giant serpent in MF #7, as the reptile writhed and coiled amid a mountain of skulls whose mouths were horribly agape.

After that issue, sales had been strong enough that Red Sonja was given her own title.

And Sonja was given something else as well: her very own comics convention, held in the wilds of New Jersey in that wonderful year 1977.

Others would have to tell you how it came about, but I saw to it that I got out there from my new digs in California. I wouldn't have missed it for the world—but I still got more than I'd expected! Frank was in attendance, yes—but this was a slightly different Frank from the one that I had spoken with on the phone (and perhaps had even encountered in person once or twice).

This was The Wizard—Frank in full beard and robes (and did he also wear a pointy hat?)— either immersing himself in the fantasy that Red Sonja, or just as likely pulling Big Red into his own bigger-than-life fantasy. There were nubile young women—several of them—masquerading as Red Sonja... and even one playing Red Sonya, from Robert E. Howard's quasi-historical story. Angelique Trouvere, a voluptuous exotic dancer— but a down-to-Earth and extremely likable person—was one of the Sonjas. Another was Wendy Pini, who in years to come would make a name for herself as writer, artist, and creator of Elfquest, a somewhat Tolkinesque series that would spawn a world of its own. The other Sonjas were notable, as well.

Never one to waste a chance for publicity—or just to have a bit of fun—Frank soon turned the "Wizard and Red Sonja Show" from that con (for which I believe he had written the basic script) into a comic-style story that I was pleased to run in The Savage Sword of Conan. I never considered trying to impose myself on it as the scripter. As someone said of another Frank, in another context: "This is Frank's world—we just live in it!"

Unfortunately, just as we were gearing up to give Red Sonja her own comic, I was becoming again too busy to write it. But, under my new writer/editor contract with Marvel, I was responsible for it, I also did not wish to relinquish it and my connection to Frank's version of Sonja... so, not long before I left New York, I asked my friend Ed Summer if he wanted to try his plan at plotting a Sonja story. Ed turned in a nice unicorn story... that I was too busy to script.

In the meanwhile, though, through Ed, I had met a film editor friend of his, Clara Noto, who was about to move back to Hollywood to take a screenwriting job. Clara and I had dabbled on a screen treatment about a female sword-and-sorcery hero, so I asked her if she'd like to take a stab at writing dialogue to go with Ed's plot—and with the breathtaking pictures that Frank had drawn to tell the story. She did—I did a bit of rewriting and editing—and Red Sonja #1 was born.

For my personal convenience, and to pay Clara's bills, I, then she, moved to Los Angeles, where we continued to co-write Red Sonja. Clara didn't think of Big Red in quite the same Howardian terms that I did, because of my long involvement with a certain Cimmerian. Rather, she looked for ways to paint with a wider fantasy brush—while I alternately encouraged her and reined her in over the months that followed.

And always there was Frank Thorne, bless him! Besides continuing to draw and letter, he even took over the coloring of the new magazine, with my blessing. He drew war-faring ships whose sails you could feel filling with relentless wind. He drew great, claustrophobic cities in which the long alleyways seemed even narrower and more shadow-stricken than you'd think they could be, while steep stairs led up to unimaginable mystery. If Clara (now rechristened Clair) tossed Frank a hall of mirrors out of Orson Welles' film The Lady from Shanghai, Frank turned it into a skeleton-reflecting nightmare. Her concept of a Theatre of Monsters inspired Frank to render a sort of Grand Guignol of the Hyborian Age, but with far more horrifying thespians. In issue #5 he rendered a two-headed dragon to end all two-headed dragons. I was surprised that his construct of the Singing Tower on the splash page of issue #6 made it past the Comics Code. Tiny bee-like warriors filled panel after panel, and almost obscenely poured their "heavy, golden nectar" down the throat of their new intended queen—Sonja. And all the while these enormous windows, composed of what seemed to be an infinite amount of touching circles, surrounded them. When Clair tossed him a tale inspired by Hannibal and his elephants, he drew mammoths (or was it mastodons?) that seemed a hundred times more menacing than any pachyderm I'd ever seen. Along the way, Wendy Pini and Christy Marx (another up-and-coming female writer of S&S comics) contributed a story or two, as well. But whoever the writer, there was an almost "Oriental" (whatever that word means) opulence about Frank's art. It closed in on you, sometimes nearly smothered you, never let you have any breathing room—and, under his spell, you didn't want any.

In some ways, when I saw Ridley Scott's Alien a year or two later, with its Giger-designed world of weird wonderment, it seemed to me that I had lived through much of it before—when working with Frank and Clair on Red Sonja. Both had this claustrophobic, suffocating, yet fascinating atmosphere about them.

But then, alas, after Red Sonja #11 (cover-dated Sept. 1978), Frank was suddenly gone.

Don't ask me why he left. He quit. Certainly nobody fired him. If my memory is correct, he simply decided that he'd done Sonja, and he wanted to move on to explore other fantasies that he could write himself, whose destinies he could more fully control. This was not an unreasonable wish, and there were no hard feelings on my part—and, I hope, not on his—when he departed, to swiftly develop his Ghita, who seemed to me like Red Sonja taken in a more sexual direction that would not have been possible at a mainstream comics publisher in the 1970s. You'll have to forgive me if, sometimes when I pore over a Ghita story, it seems to me as if she is Sonja unplugged, as it were.

Red Sonja struggled on for a while—if "struggle" is the right word when the artists involved include John and Sal Buscema and Frank Brunner—but sales had never been really strong on the Sonja title. Frank was, in his way, an artist's artist... like Steranko, like Windsor-Smith, like a small group of other comics' illustrators who turn out highly individualistic work. Sometimes it sells, sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes the audience finds such a series in sufficient numbers to keep it going—and sometimes, well—sometimes the audience fails. Sometimes it opts for the ordinary, and lets the extraordinary wither on the vine.

But we're not here to celebrate the Great God of Sales—and in any event, Frank Thorne's Red Sonja was hardly some basket case, just because it wasn't racking up Amazing Spider-Man numbers.

We're here to celebrate Frank Thorne—and his rendition of Red Sonja. Robert E. Howard may have conceived her, after a fashion—I may have developed her into a Hyborian Age heroine—Smith and Maroto and Buscema may all have made their own considerable artistic contributions to the launching of her saga.

But, in one sense, the Red Sonja of the 1970s will always belong to Frank Thorne.

And, in another sense—I suspect that Frank will always belong to her!

Bless you, Frank! Long may you reign!

Roy Thomas has been a writer and often editor in the field of comics, primarily for Marvel and DC Comics, since 1965. He still writes the occasional comic book and had worked with Stan Lee on the Spider-Man newspaper comic strip since 2000. He also edits Alter Ego, a magazine that deals with the history of heroic comics from 1935 to 1975. His lovely and razor-sharp wife Dann is a redhead—and he has to keep reminding himself that he met her after he'd developed Red Sonja, not before!

WHAT HELL-SPAWN CREATED THIS?

MARVEL FEATURE 2

IT'S NOT UNUSUAL TO **DREAM**... WE **ALL** DO, NIGHTLY...

IT'S RATHER RARER TO DREAM OF BEAUTIFUL, **SCARLET-HAIRED WOMEN**... WOMEN WHOSE **FLASHING** GREEN EYES AND **LITHE-SOME** FORMS SEEM REAL ENOUGH TO TOUCH...

RARER **STILL** IS TO OPEN ONE'S EYES TO THE SOFT LIGHT OF **DAWN**, AND DOING SO...

...**AWAKEN TO YOUR DREAMS.**'

LIE **STILL**, PIG! THAT'S AN **HYRKANIAN ASP** COILED ATOP YOUR CHEST...

IT'S **SLEEPING** NOW, BUT SHOULD YOU SO MUCH AS **ALTER** THE RHYTHM OF YOUR **BREATH**...

FRANK THORNE '75

BLOOD of the HUNTER

BRUCE JONES * **FRANK THORNE**
WRITER ARTIST

ROY THOMAS, EDITOR

FEATURING THE HEROINE CREATED BY:
ROBERT E. HOWARD

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REST QUIETLY NOW, WHILE *RED SONJA* RELIEVES YOU OF ALL THIS *BOTHERSOME LOOT* YOU'VE STOLEN.

BY ERLIK, YOU'VE DONE *WELL* FOR YOURSELF, BRIGAND.

DO YOU *SPECIALIZE* IN *NOBLE-MEN*, BRIGAND...

...OR DO THE GODS MERELY *SMILE* ON YOU OF LATE?

THIS IS AN *HYRKANIAN KNOT*. IT CANNOT BE CUT WITHOUT *LAMING* THE HORSE, AND ONLY AN HYRKANIAN CAN UNTIE IT IN *LESS* THAN THREE HOURS.

...BY WHICH TIME I'LL HAVE AN AMPLE *LEAD* ON YOU.

AH? AND WHAT'S *THIS?*

LEAVE THAT!

TAKE ALL THE REST-- I'LL NOT FOLLOW YOU-- ONLY *LEAVE THAT NECKLACE!*

A SOLID *GOLD KEY?* TO FIT A SOLID *GOLD DOOR*, PERHAPS?

I THINK IT WILL BE FAR SAFER IN *HERE* THAN WITH YOU...

OH, AND DON'T FRET ABOUT YOUR *SCALY FRIEND* THERE...

IT'S ONLY A *GARTER SNAKE!*

AT THE OUTSKIRTS OF KHISHTAM, SHREWDLY ALIGNED WITH THE ROAD TO THAT CORINTHIAN VILLAGE, SQUATS AN INN WHOSE REPUTATION FOR EXCELLENT ALE IS MATCHED ONLY BY THE VOLUME OF LICE IN ITS BEDS...

IT IS A PLACE FOR DRINKING AND LAUGHING, BELCHING AND BRAWLING...A PLACE TO MAKE NEW ENEMIES AND FIND OLD FRIENDS..

YES, MY LADY, WHAT IS YOUR PLEAS-

MITRA! IT'S SONJA!

KATRIN! HOW MANY YEARS HAS IT BEEN? AND STILL SLINGING ALE IN THIS ROACH TRAP!

BUT YOU'VE DONE WELL ENOUGH YOURSELF OF LATE, I SEE! THAT NECKLACE IS SOLID GOLD, I'LL WAGER!

AYE. I STOLE IT FROM A BRIGAND WITH A SPOTTED HORSE. AND DID YOU EVER HEAR A STRANGER INSCRIPTION: "QUINCA HEPLA BALEK HEPLA NESTRO"...

IT'S IN NO TONGUE KNOWN TO ME.

KATRIN, WHAT IS IT? YOUR FACE..!

CAST AWAY THIS CHARM, SONJA! IT IS A DEMON SPAWN, AN EVIL THING!

THE NAME "BALEK" IS STEEPED IN DREAD IN THIS VILLAGE SINCE BEFORE I CAME HERE!

BE RID OF IT, SONJA, I BEG OF YOU!

REDTOP, DID YOU RIDE IN ON A BAY MARE THIS NIGHT, LADEN WITH BULGING KNAPSACK?

WHAT OF IT?

WELL, BOTH MARE AND SACK ARE CLATTERING OFF DOWN THE ROAD JUST NOW TOWARD THE HILLS...

ERLIK'S GULLET!

HEY! THAT'S MY HORSE!

THAT BAY OF MINE IS TIRED FROM A DAY'S RIDE, WHILE THIS MOUNT BENEATH ME IS FRESH...

NOW IF HE HADN'T TAKEN MY SWORD AND MAIL...

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

REIN UP, BRIGAND!

THAT'S RED SONJA'S BOOTY YOU BEAR, STOLEN FROM A WORTHIER FOE THAN YOU!

GODS, BUT HE'S LIBERAL WITH MY SWORD!

CLUMSY SWORD-WORK FOR A PROFESSIONAL THIEF!

CARE TO TRY AGAIN?

NOW!

MITRA'S BEARD.. A CRIPPLE!

AND A YOUTHFUL CRIPPLE AT THAT!

SHE SENSES THAT HE IS NOT WATCHING WHERE HE RIDES! IF SHE CAN KEEP HIM DISTRACTED A BIT LONGER...

SCARCELY THREE QUARTERS OF AN HOUR LATER...

THE INN IS STRANGELY QUIET. HAS EVERY-ONE GONE HOME NOW THAT I'VE NEED OF A COOL FLAGON?

TARIM'S BLOOD!

WHAT HELL-SPAWN CREATED THIS?

KATRIN--! SHE'S MADE A SIGN WITH HER OWN BLOOD!..

...A LEOPARD?

A MAP OF SOME KIND?

OR THE SPOTS ON THE RUMP OF A BRIGAND'S MARE!?

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

RED SONJA HAS BEEN PURSUED BEFORE... COUNTLESS TIMES. WHY THEN THIS URGE TO LOOK CONSTANTLY OVER HER SHOULDER? NOT UNCERTAINTY, SURELY...

FEELING BETTER, LAD?

GIVE ME BACK MY SWORD AND I'LL SHOW YOU SOON ENOUGH, WENCH!

HIGH SOUNDING TALK FROM ONE SO YOUNG.

WHEN WE REACH GROMLIC'S BAND YOU'LL SOON LEARN WHAT A CRIPPLE CAN DO!

I MADE NO MENTION OF YOUR AFFLICTION. IT'S YOUR SWORDSMANSHIP THAT'S LACKING.

PERHAPS I COULD TEACH YOU...

HA! AND PRAY TELL ME, WHAT COULD I LEARN FROM A WOMAN?

MORE THAN THOSE POOR DOGS, I'D HOPE! LOOK!

GROMLIC! IT'S GROMLIC'S BAND! THEY'RE SURROUNDED-- BY A BUNCH OF PICTS!

THEN TAKE YOUR SWORD, HAUGHTY THIEF, WHILE RED SONJA GIVES YOU YOUR FIRST LESSON!

LOOK UP DOGS!...

BEHOLD THE SWORD OF YOUR MASTER--

RED SONJA OF HYRKANIA!

BEL'S BREATH! IT'S DUNKIN-- AND HE'S BROUGHT A SAVIOR FROM HELL!

AS A CERTAIN *CIMMERIAN FRIEND* MINE USED TO SAY...

...THE ONLY THING *BETTER* THAN A *DEAD* PICT...

...IS *TWO* DEAD PICTS!

...OR *THREE* ...OR *FOUR* OR...

WHOA! GIRL! I'M ON *YOUR* SIDE!

AND MY THANKS FOR *STEMMING* THE TIDE, WHOEVER YE BE!

HO, DUNKIN! YOU'VE DONE *WELL!* I ASK ONLY FOR *BOOTY,* AND YOU BRING ME *RE-INFORCEMENTS!*

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

WELL!... COME FOR ANOTHER *LESSON*, DUNKIN?

YOU'D *LIKE* THAT WOULDN'T YOU? ANOTHER CHANCE TO *SHOW OFF* IN FRONT OF MY *FATHER*?

YOU'RE VERY *GOOD* WHEN IT COMES TO KILLING *PICTS*, WHO SHOULD NEVER HAVE WANDERED SO FAR FROM THEIR SAVAGE *HOMELAND* IN THE *FIRST* PLACE!

STILL THE *SASSY* TONGUE, EH?

ONE THING PUZZLES ME, HOWEVER. HOW IS IT A WOMAN OF SUCH *OBVIOUS* PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT SPENDS *ALL* HER TIME CHAFING IT IN CHAIN MAIL AND *PARADING* ABOUT THE COUNTRY LIKE A MAN?

HAVE YOU *ALWAYS* BEEN THUS CONFUSED ABOUT YOUR SEX?

ALL THROUGH NOW?

PERHAPS IT ISN'T *CONFUSION* AT ALL! PERHAPS *YOUR* FATHER WANTED A *SON*--AND YOU'RE DETERMINED TO *BE* ONE! OR DID YOU GUT *HIM* WITH YOUR SWORD, TOO?

BY ERLIK--!

THAT'S RIGHT-- *SWEAR* LIKE A MAN! RUN ME *THROUGH* LIKE A MAN!

PERHAPS IF YOU'RE LUCKY, SOMEDAY THE GREAT GOD MITRA WILL *MAKE* YOU A MAN!

IF I WEREN'T A *CRIPPLE*, YOU COULD KILL ME INSTANTLY WITHOUT FEELING ANY LESS *VIRILE* ABOUT IT.

GOOD NIGHT, RED SONJA!

I APOLOGIZE, FLAME HAIR-- FOR *BOTH* US.

HE IS A *GOOD* LAD, BUT BITTER OVER THAT *CURSED* LEG...

AND WHAT ABOUT *YOU*, GROMLIC?

DO *YOU* THINK A WOMAN SHOULD WEAR *CHAIN MAIL*?

XXX

(SIGH) I THINK A WOMAN'S THOUGHTS ARE HER *OWN*, TO DO WITH AS SHE WILL.

YOU NEEDN'T *JUSTIFY* THEM FOR THE LIKES OF A SHARP-TONGUED *STRIPLING*.

I *WONDER*.

I MADE A *VOW* ONCE THAT NO MAN WOULD TOUCH ME, SAVE HE THAT *BESTS* ME IN BATTLE.

PERHAPS IT WAS A *STUPID* VOW...

...MADE BY A *STUPID* YOUNG GIRL.

LEAVE ME NOW, GROMLIC. I WOULD BE *ALONE* WITH MY THOUGHTS.

AYE.

TALK TO HIM, SONJA. HE *IS* A GOOD LAD. PERHAPS A *WOMAN* CAN SUCCEED WHERE A FATHER HAS *FAILED*...

HE FISHES THE NORTHEAST STREAM EACH DAY BEFORE SUN-UP. I WOULD BE *GRATEFUL*...

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A FINE MORNING'S CATCH!

ABOUT AVERAGE. DOUBTLESS THE GREAT RED SONJA WOULD HAVE CAUGHT THEM WITH HER BARE HANDS!

WHY AREN'T YOU IN CAMP, ARM-WRESTLING WITH MY FATHER?

I CAME IN PEACE. SHALL WE TALK, OR SHALL I LEAVE?

YOU CHOOSE.

YOUR FATHER SAYS YOU'VE HAD SCHOOLING. CAN YOU READ THIS?

MMM...

ZHEMRI-- A DEAD TONGUE!

YOU MIGHT LEARN IT-- YOU PUT DOWN YOUR SWORD LONG

"WHOSOEVER RULES BALEK... RULES THE WORLD!"

"BALEK"...

YOU KNOW THE NAME?

VAGUELY. BALEK WAS A DAEMON, I THINK, OR A SORCERER'S FAMILIAR.

THERE IS AN ANCIENT MAGE NAMED NEJA THREE DAYS' RIDE FROM HERE. SHE COULD TELL YOU MORE OF IT.

WHY THE RUSH? I THOUGHT WE COULD TALK AWHILE...

THE MEN WILL WANT BREAK-FAST.

IS IT ME YOU HATE, DUNKIN, OR ALL WOMEN?

IS THAT WHAT YOU THINK, WENCH?... THAT I CAN'T HAVE A WOMAN BECAUSE I'M A CRIPPLE...

BECAUSE I'M NOT A WHOLE MAN?

WELL? ISN'T IT TRUE?

WITCH! I'LL SHOW YOU--!

DUNK-- :GASP!: DUNKIN--!

TAMALK! WHAT IN THE NAME OF THE GODS?

ATTACKED... :GASP!: IN OUR SLEEP... MAD MAN... DEMON WITH ... SWORD... STRANGE SPOTTED HORSE--:

THE CAMP! QUICKLY!

DUNKIN, WAIT!

GODS OF MY FATHER!

DUNKIN, *LISTEN* TO ME! I HAVE TO *LEAVE* YOU!

WHOEVER DID THIS IS AFTER *ME*, NOT YOU! HE'S TRYING TO *UNNERVE* ME BY DESTROYING THOSE AROUND ME. IF WE STAY TOGETHER, HE'LL KILL *YOU*, TOO!

THE MAN WHO DID THIS WILL DIE BY *MY* SWORD ONLY!

YOU WILL *STAY!*

SORRY, DUNKIN...

I DON'T HAVE *TIME* FOR ANY MORE *LESSONS!*

*N*OT UNTIL NIGHTFALL DOES RED SONJA *SLOW* HER EXHAUSTED STEED...

WHAT'S *HAPPENING* TO ME? I'VE NEVER *RUN* FROM A FOE BEFORE...

...AND FALLS *IMMEDIATELY* INTO A *TROUBLED SLEEP*, EVEN AS SHE MURMURS TO HERSELF...

...BUT THE *LAD*... HE MIGHT HAVE BEEN KILLED...!

*O*NLY TO AWAKEN WITHIN MINUTES...

WHO?!

DUNKIN?...

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

DUNKIN!!

FIEND OF HELL! SHOW YOURSELF!

COME FORTH AND TASTE THE WRATH OF RED SONJA'S BLADE!

RED SONJA PRESSES SOUTHWARD, EVER STRAINING FOR THE SIGHT OF A DISTANT SPECK BEHIND HER, EVER LISTENING FOR THE SOUND OF TRODDING HOOVES...

AND WITH EVERY PASSING HOUR, THE WEIGHT ABOUT HER NECK GROWS HEAVIER...

WHAT PRIZE COULD BE WORTH THE SLAUGHTER OF SO MANY?

YET, ONLY THE NIGHT WIND AND CICADAS ARE HER ANSWER.

IN ALL MY DAYS I'VE NEVER MET A TRACKER LIKE THIS ONE...

UNTIL, FOR THE FIRST TIME IN HER LIFE, SHE IS TO KNOW THE TASTE OF REAL FEAR...

TAINTED! SOMEONE'S POLLUTED THE WATER!

BLOOD OF TARIM! NOW HE'S AHEAD OF ME!

REVEAL YOURSELF, YOU BUTCHERING PIG! LET ME SEE YOU ONLY ONCE!

COME, HORSE, WE'LL FIND OTHER STREAMS...

YET, TWO FULL DAYS PASS WITH NO SIGN OF WATER; AND, BUT FOR THE VULTURES, ALL SIGNS OF WILDLIFE SEEM TO HAVE MYSTERIOUSLY VANISHED...

I KNOW, HORSE--I'D GIVE ALL THIS FINE BOOTY FOR ONE BERRY TREE IN FULL BLOOM.

AND EVER PRESENT IS THE DOGGED FEAR OF AN ARROW IN THE BACK, A SPEAR THRUST FROM THE BUSH...

I'D BEST HIDE THIS TRINKET NOW... I MAY NOT HAVE A CHANCE LATER.

ERLIK BE PRAISED! WATER!

SWEET MITRA! LET IT BE PURE...

AGHH! THE BLOODY FIEND! HE'S BEEN HERE, TOO!

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

AND, THE NEXT BRIGHT MORNING...

WRETCHED BEAST... DOUBTLESS IT *DRANK* FROM ONE OF THE POISONED POOLS...

I *DARE* NOT EAT IT NOW...

THEN, AT DUSK...

A *FARM!* CAN IT *BE?*...

WATER... I *MUST* HAVE WATER SOON!...

NO! NO!

I AM THE CAUSE OF THIS!

BLACKNESS THEN; AND, WHEN EYES FLUTTER BACK ONCE MORE...

WHA--

SOME-THING ON MY...

TARIM'S BLOOD! A CORAL SNAKE!

WITH FEAR-GLAZED EYES, RED SONJA REGARDS THE VENAMOUS SERPENT...

ONE BITE-- AND I MEET THE GODS!

ALL DAY THE REPTILE SLEEPS ATOP THE PET-RIFIED GIRL, HER MUSCLES SCREAMING FOR RELEASE! THEN, TOWARD DUSK...

THUNDER! IT'S BEGINNING TO RAIN!

SONJA WATCHES THE POUNDING RAIN DRIVE OFF THE SNAKE, WHILE SHE OPENS HER PARCHED MOUTH TO IT...

BUT, THE NEXT DAY FINDS HER RAVENOUS WITH THIRST AGAIN...

THIRSTY, RED SONJA?

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

LOOK *WELL* BEFORE YOU *DIE*, RED SONJA OF HYRKANIA! KNOW THE FACE OF *REJAK THE TRACKER*...

...KNOW IT IS *HE* WHO HAS BROUGHT YOU TO YOUR *KNEES* THIS DAY!

NOW *TELL ME*, WENCH, WHERE YOU'VE HIDDEN THE *GOLD KEY*--OR YOUR DEATH WILL BE A *SLOW* AND *TORTUROUS* ONE...

TELL ME!

...S...S... SADDLE... BAG...

YOU JUST *REST* NOW, WHILE *REJAK RELIEVES* YOU OF THIS B--

...TREACHEROUS...

...*HELLION*...

...N...N...N-NGH...

"FINISHED. ENDED. THE WORDS NEVER SOUNDED SWEETER. YET, ALL QUESTIONS ARE NOT YET ANSWERED...

"THERE'S AN OLD MAGE NAMED NEJA," DUNKIN HAD SAID. "SHE CAN TELL YOU MORE OF IT."

VERY WELL, TO OLD NEJA THEN...

...AND TO ANSWERS NOT YET QUESTIONED!

NEXT: BALEK·LIVES!

"Know also, O prince, that in those selfsame days that Conan the Cimmerian did stalk the Hyborian kingdoms, one of the few swords worthy to cross with his was that of Red Sonja, warrior woman out of majestic Hyrkania. Forced to flee her homeland because she spurned the advances of a king and slew him instead, she rode west across the Turanian Steppes and into the shadowed mists of legendry."

—*The Nemedian Chronicles.*

Stan Lee PRESENTS: RED SONJA

INFERNAL MILITIA! THEY'RE LIKE A PACK OF LEECHES! GETTING SO A GIRL CAN'T MAKE A DECENT LIVING AT BRIGANDING!
AGHH! AND THIS HELLISH WIND! IT'S ALL I CAN DO TO STAY IN THE SADDLE!
FASTER, MY SPOTTED FRIEND, AND PRAY TO MITRA YOU DON'T LOSE YOUR FOOTING!
JV/238

BALEK-LIVES!

BRUCE JONES / WRITER | FRANK THORNE / ARTIST | PETRA GOLDBERG / COLORIST | ROY THOMAS / EDITOR | FEATURING THE HEROINE CREATED BY: ROBERT E. HOWARD

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ONE OF TEN PAGES IN THIS EDITION NOT SCANNED FROM THE ORIGINAL ART.

WE'VE NO *CHOICE*, HORSE! THAT MOB BEHIND US HAS *BLOOD* IN ITS EYES!

I KNOW IT'S A FAIR *JUMP*, BUT IT'S THE *ONLY WAY*...

BACK, PIG! WE NEED *RUNNING ROOM!*

ERLIK'S GULLET! PRAY TO THE GODS AND SEE WHAT COMES OF IT--

WE'RE *CUT OFF!*

COURAGE, NOW-- WE'VE MADE *LONGER* LEAPS... AND WHILE *WOUNDED*, AT THAT!

YOU CAN *DO* IT!

CURSE THE *GODS* FOR THIS *WIND!*

NO!

NO! WE WERE *CLEAR!*

THIS IS *IT*, THEN! THIS IS HOW IT *ENDS*!

CONAN...

...I NEVER...

...LET YOU...

CAPTAIN!

I *SEE* IT, FOOL!

...YET *SOME*-HOW, IT ALL *SEEMS SUCH* A *TERRIBLE WASTE*!

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

HEH-HEH! IDIOTS! WASTE INDEED!

THE ONLY WASTE OCCURRED WHEN THE GODS GAVE THOSE FOOLS BRAINS!

W-WHAT HAPPENED? I... I...

NEVER FELL AT ALL, DEARIE! MERELY AN ILLUSION I CREATED TO RID US OF THAT PESKY MILITIA!

UNFORTUNATELY I DIDN'T HAVE TIME TO EXCLUDE YOU FROM THE SPELL'S INFLUENCE.

AN... ILLUSION?

HEH-HEH, NOT BAD FOR A DEAF, BLIND OLD HAG, EH?

AYE, I DABBLE IN THE BLACK ARTS, BUT DOUBTLESS YOU KNEW THAT BEFORE SEEKING ME OUT.

BUT COME, MY CAVE'S MUCH MORE COMFORTABLE...

AH, YES! BALEK'S KEY! S'BEEN AN AGE SINCE OLD NEJA'S FELT IT'S COOL METAL BENEATH HER FINGERS!

'TIS SOLID GOLD, DID YOU KNOW? BUT VALUED MORE FOR WHAT IT FITS! HOW CAME YOU BY IT?

I TOOK IT FROM A BRIGAND NAMED REJAK, ALONG WITH HIS HORSE.

BUT PRAY TELL ME, WHO IS BALEK?

BALEK OF OLD? 'TWAS EONS BEFORE EVEN MY TIME, REDHAIR.

THE KINGDOMS OF THROS AND SKURGA WERE MIRED IN THE DEADLOCK OF A HUNDRED-YEAR WAR, WHOSE CAUSE HAD LONG BEEN FORGOTTEN, AS IS OFT THE FOLLY OF MORTALS...

"KING MILOS OF THROS WAS UNPARALELLED IN HIS NUMBERED ARMY, AN ENDLESS SEETHING JUGGERNAUT OF EXPERT FIGHTING MEN...

"YET THELOK OF SKURGA WAS WITHOUT EQUAL IN FIGHTING STRATEGY. AYE, THEY WERE WELL MET...

"YET, FOR ALL THIS, THELOK GREW WEARY OF THE BLOODLETTING, LONGING FOR THE IDLE DAYS OF PEACE...

SIRE, THIS OUTLANDER WOULD HAVE AUDIENCE WITH YOU.

A KING GROWS *JADED* WITH CONSTANT BATTLE... LET LAMRAC SHOW YOU *OTHER* DIVERSIONS...

"THE KING WAS **ENTRANCED** FROM THE FIRST. DESPITE **WARNINGS** FROM COURTIERS THAT LAMRAC WAS OF **EVIL** BEARING, HE SAW ONLY CHARM AND **RELIEF** FROM THE TEDIUM OF WAR...

AMAZING! I'VE NEVER SEEN *COMPARABLE* CRAFTSMANSHIP!

"EACH DAY THAT LEMRAC **LINGERED** IN THE PALACE BROUGHT NEW **WONDERS** TO THE EYES OF THE ENRAPTURED KING...

FOR YOUR *AMUSEMENT*, MAJESTY...

BY THE *GODS!* THEY'RE *BEAUTIFUL!*

"...WHILE ON THE **BATTLEFIELD**, HIS ABSENCE OF STRATEGY BEGAN TO TURN THE **TIDE** FOR MILO'S ARMY...

BACK! BACK! THROS HAS *BROKEN* OUR LINE OF *DEFENSE!*

I HAD IT MADE *ESPECIALLY* FOR YOU, GLORIOUS ONE! IT CONTAINS YOUR *EVERY* GESTURE AND *MANNERISM!*

IT'S *MAGNIFICENT!*

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

"FOR **DAYS**, THE KING TARRIED IN **IDLE NARCISSISM** WITH THE **MECHANICAL** LIKENESS. THEN...

BALZAG! WHAT ***THINK*** YOU OF MY--

YOUR ***MAJESTY!*** WE'RE ***DOOMED!*** KING MILOS ***OVER-RUNS*** THE PALACE!

"WITH **DISBELIEVING** EYES, THELOK WATCHED HIS OLD ENEMY **IN-VADE** THE VERY COURTYARDS BENEATH HIM...

"...WHILE, THAT EVENING, HE SAW **MIGHTY MILOS** SUPPING AT HIS **OWN** ROYAL TABLE BESIDE THE TREACHEROUS **LAMRAC**...

"IN THE BLACKNESS OF THE **PALACE DUNGEONS**, THELOK TURNED TO THE ONLY **POWER** HE KNEW TO SEEK **REVENGE**...

O MIGHTY BALEK, GOD OF THE DARK REGIONS, DELIVER THY ***SPIRIT*** IN EXCHANGE FOR THIS ***SOUL***, AND WREAK YOUR ***DAM-NATION*** ON THE USURPERS OF THROS...!

"THAT NIGHT, THERE RAGED SUCH A **STORM** AS THE LAND HAD **NEVER** KNOWN! AND, IN THE KING'S CHAMBER, THE **TOWERING** LIKENESS OF THELOK **STIRRED**...

WHAT IN THE NAME OF THE ***GODS?***

YAAA

AIEEEE!

"WHAT FOLLOWED WAS A **MASS SLAUGHTER** OF SUCH HIDEOUS PROPORTIONS, NO WORDS CAN **DESCRIBE** IT...

"BALEK'S **SPIRIT**, ENDOWED WITHIN THE MECHANICAL CREATION, **SYSTEMATICALLY** TOOK THE STOLID FORTRESS OF KING THELOK APART **STONE BY STONE**...

"NEITHER THROSON OR SKURGAN WAS **SPARED** THAT TERRIBLE NIGHT -- NO ONE SAVE **THELOK** AND **LAMRAC**...

"WHEN THE CAPTURED KING AT LAST FREED HIMSELF, HE STOOD **AGHAST** AT THE AWFUL RUIN ABOUT HIM...

"YET BALEK WOULD NOT BE **STOPPED**...

"LAMRAC **ALONE** WAS ABLE TO HALT THE MASSIVE JUGGERNAUT BY **REMOVING** THE GREAT **GOLD KEY** IN HIS BACK...

"AND KING THELOK **REPAID** HIM **JUSTLY** FOR THE GESTURE...

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

THELOK THEN *THREW* THE KEY AND HIM-SELF INTO THE *SEA*...

IT *FOLLOWS*, THEN, WHY REJAK SO *JEALOUSLY* GUARDED THIS KEY...

AYE, SCARLET-LOCKS... HE WHO WOULD *CONTROL* *BALEK* WOULD CONTROL THE *WORLD!*

"THE PALACE WALLS **CRUMBLED** AROUND MIGHTY BALEK AND HIS TREACHEROUS CREATORS---AND THEIR LIKE WAS **NEVER HEARD OF AGAIN!**

YET, BALEK'S TOMB IS TODAY *UNKNOWN?*

NOT TO *ALL*, FAIR SONJA! THERE IS *ONE* STILL LIVING WHO KNOWS WHERE MIGHTY BALEK RESTS... WHO ONLY *WAITS* UNTIL THE WHEREABOUTS OF THE *KEY* ARE ONCEMORE *REVEALED!*

PRAY, *WHO?* DO YOU KNOW THIS... THIS...

UH... MY *HEAD*... DIZZY... THIS... *DRINK!*

...WAS *DRUGGED!* LOVELY ONE, YES! OLD NEJA HAS *HEARD* THE LEGENDS OF RED SONJA... OLD NEJA WAS *PREPARED*... =HEH-HEH!=

YOU! YOU *KNOW* WHERE BALEK IS...YOU--

HEH-HEH! *CAREFUL*, PRETTY THING! YOU BEST LIE *BACK* AND NOT *FIGHT* IT!

THAT'S *BETTER*, YES! *SLEEP*, LITTLE SONJA, WHILE OLD NEJA *RELIEVES* YOU OF THESE *WEIGHTY* RESPONSIBILITIES... =HEH-HEH!=

EONS OR MINUTES? SONJA WILL NEVER KNOW, BUT WHEN THE DARKNESS CLEARS AND HER SLUGGISH EYES BLINK OPEN ONCE AGAIN, IT IS NOT THE FIGURE OF THE OLD CRONE SHE BEHOLDS! BUT THAT OF...

BALEK!

AYE, FLAME-HAIR! MIGHTY BALEK --EXHUMED AND WAITING HERE FOR THIRTY YEARS WHERE I FIRST UNCOVERED HIM..

...WAITING FOR THE FOLLY OF MAN TO BRING ME THE KEY OF GOLD ONCE MORE... DELIVERED BY THE HANDS OF A FOOL SUCH AS YOU!

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I WANTED YOU TO *SEE* THIS, SONJA, IN PAYMENT FOR HAVING *BROUGHT* ME THE KEY...

I WANTED YOU TO *KNOW* THAT I AM THE *GREAT-GRANDDAUGHTER OF LAMRAC THE CREATOR*--THAT I HAVE WAITED A *LIFETIME* TO *AVENGE* MY FAMILY'S NAME--

--AND THAT THE WHOLE *WORLD* WILL *SUFFER* NOW AT THE HANDS OF *BALEK THE INVINCIBLE!*

AS THE ANCIENT CRONE **CACKLES** HYSTERICALLY, A **DEEP, GUTTERAL RUMBLING**, AS OF DISTANT THUNDER, IS HEARD... AND MIGHTY BALEK'S RUST-CAKED LIMBS **STIR** ONCE AGAIN...

THERE IS YOUR *FIRST VICTIM*, BALEK!

KILL HER, I *COMMAND* YOU!

SONJA FEELS THE **HAIRS** ON HER **NECK** STAND **RIGID** AS THE METAL GOLIATH MOVES **FORWARD** WITH A CREAKING **GROAN**...

HIS MOVEMENTS ARE *SLUGGISH* FROM YEARS IN THE DAMP EARTH... PERHAPS IF I'M *NIMBLE--!*

STILL, I CAN'T *DODGE* FOREVER ON THIS *SHORT* LENGTH OF *CHAIN!*

IF ONLY I CAN *MANEUVER* HIM TO STRIKE THE *RIGHT* PLACE...

QUICK AS A *CAT*, SONJA TAKES *ADVANTAGE* OF THE SITUATION...

GAAAGH!

NOW, OLD FROG! COMMAND HIM TO *BREAK* THE OTHER CHAIN, OR YOU BREATHE *NO MORE!*

GAAGH! DO AS... (URK!)... DO AS SHE *SAYS!* *BREAK*... (URK) ...BREAK THE *CHAIN!*

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

GOOD! NOW BACK OUT SLOWLY, NEJA... AND NO TRICKS!

...I'M CHOKING!

YOU'LL BREATHE EASIER WHEN WE'RE SAFELY OUTSIDE!

SHADES OF ERLIK!

HEH-HEH!! LITTLE FOOL-- TO BE DECEIVED BY AN ILLUSION INTO LETTING GO!

NOW, BALEK--GET HER!

CUT OFF! I'VE RUN OUT OF MOUNTAIN AND TIME!

HE'LL SQUASH ME LIKE AN INSECT WITH THOSE METAL HANDS!

ONE CHANCE! IF I CAN LURE HIM TO THE EDGE, AND IF THE CHAIN WILL HOLD--!

HE'S CHARGING! IT'S NOW--

--OR NEVER!

UH! ALMOST RIPPED MY ARM OUT OF ITS SOCKET!

NOW TO TEND TO--

NEJA!

SCHEMING SHE-DEVIL! YOU'LL PAY HORRIBLY FOR WHAT YOU'VE DONE TO ME!

FAR BELOW, THE CRUSHING SOUND OF THE MONSTER'S IMPACT ECHOS UP THE STILL VALLEY...

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

SWORD AND CHAIN LASH BACK AT THE SAME TIME...

BUT THE ARM OF YOUTH IS FASTER!

THE HAG'S FADING SCREAMS ARE YET RESOUNDING AS SONJA GAINS SOLID GROUND ONCE MORE...

HOURS LATER, THE CRIMSON-TRESSED WARRIOR AT LAST FREES HERSELF OF THE CHAFING METAL BANDS...

SO ENDS MIGHTY BALEK AND HIS POWER-CRAZED MISTRESS...

TARIM'S BLOOD!!

BY ALL THE GODS-- THERE'S NO *STOPPING* THAT THING!

IT WILL *HUNT* ME DOWN UNTIL IT'S *COMPLETED* HER LAST ORDER!

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

TARIM'S BLOOD! AM I TO BE CUT OFF CONTINUALLY AT EVERY TURN?

THAT FALL MUST HAVE SHAKEN SOME OF THE RUST OUT!

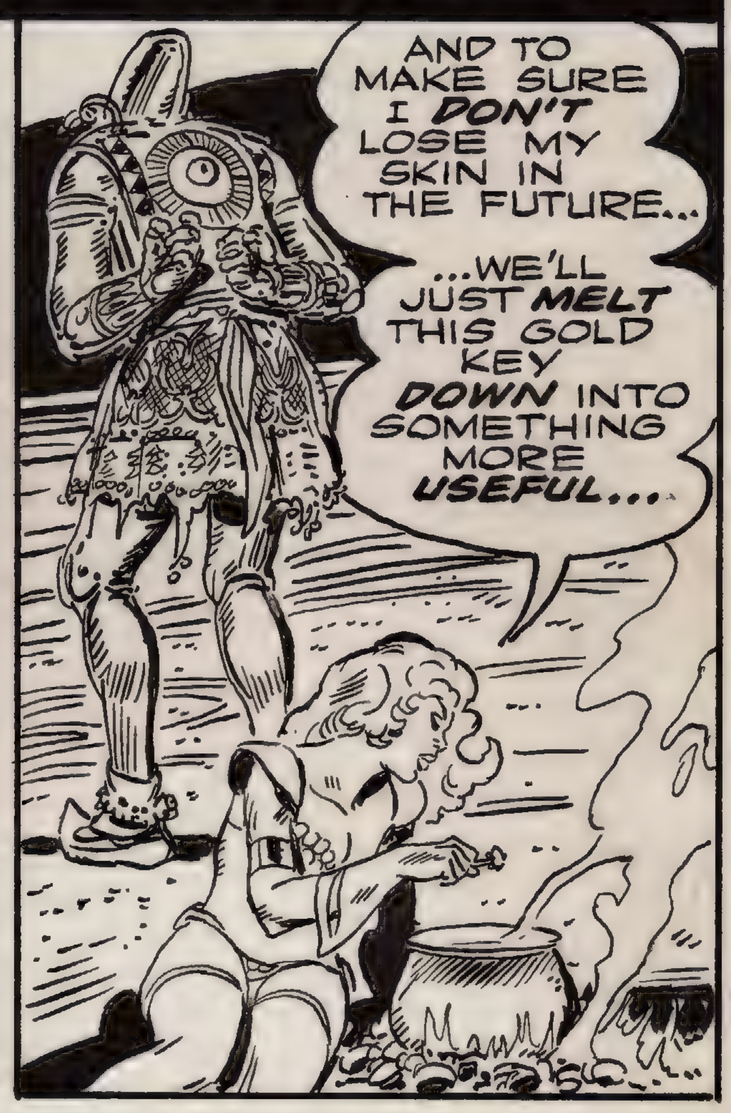
HE'S GAINED SPEED!

MY ONLY HOPE IS TO BE FASTER YET!

COME OUT, BLAST YOU!

MERCIFUL GODS-- THE KEY'S STUCK!

ANOTHER SECOND-- AND HE'LL HAVE ME!



NEXT: EYES OF THE GORGON!

MARV FEAT 4

"Know also, O prince, that in those selfsame days that Conan the Cimmerian did stalk the Hyborian kingdoms, one of the few swords worthy to cross with his was that of Red Sonja, warrior-woman out of majestic Hyrkania. Forced to flee her homeland because she spurned the advances of a king and slew him instead, she rode west across the Turanian Steppes and into the shadowed mists of legendry."

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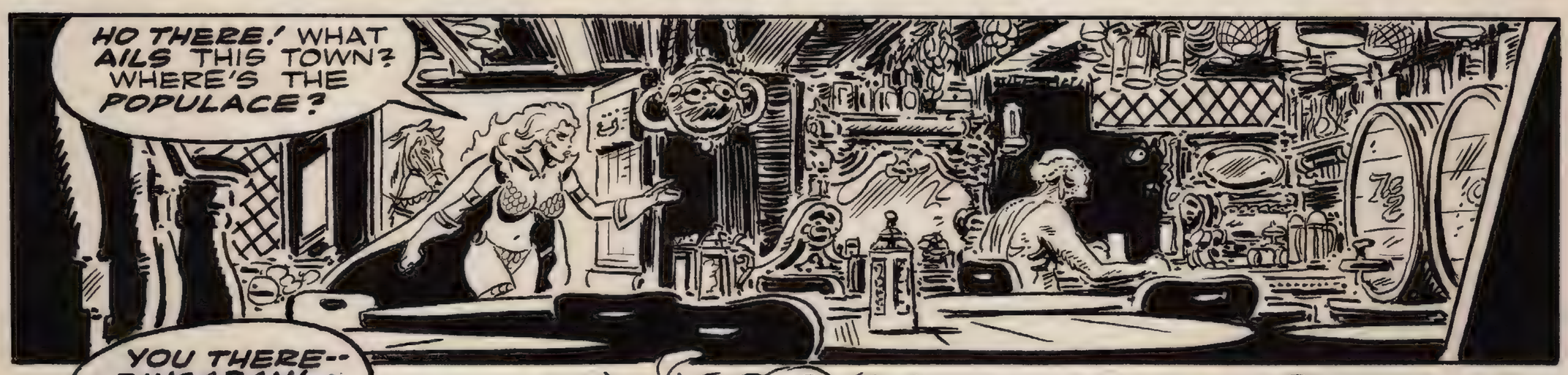


EYES OF THE GORGON

FEATURING THE HEROINE CREATED BY
ROBERT E. HOWARD

STORY: BRUCE JONES | EDITOR: ROY THOMAS | ART: FRANK THORNE

MARVEL FEATURE 4

2

WHAT IN THE NAME OF--?

VAAAGH!

WITCH!

DEMONESS!

HELL-SPAWN!

WHAT MANNER OF MADMAN ARE YOU? I CAME ONLY TO--

SUCCUBUS!

DEVIL!

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!

NOW WE'LL SEE WHO--

SHE-DEMON!

GODDESS OF DEATH!

AUGGH!!

BY MITRA! WHAT KIND OF VILLAGE HAVE I HAPPENED ON?

DEMONESS!

TURN OUR VILLAGERS TO STONE, WILL YE?

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

I'VE HAD MY *FILL* OF THIS *LUNACY!*

THERE SHE IS-- *HELPLESS* IN THE *DAYLIGHT!*

GRAB HER! *KILL* HER!

ISHTAR'S GIRDLE! --THE *WHOLE TOWN'S* INSANE!

SO BE IT, THEN! THEY'LL *SOON FIND* THEIR SENSES AFTER TASTING THE *STING OF RED SONJA'S BLADE!*

STEP UP, GENTLEMEN...

...LET RED SONJA *FILL* YOUR CUPS...

...TO *OVER-FLOWING...*

...*WITH BLOOD!*

YOU'LL *EXCUSE* ME NOW...

...WHILE I TEND TO THESE *OTHER* CUSTOMERS.'

GET HER!

KILL THE DEMON!

BIND HER!

SHE'S HELPLESS IN THE SUNLIGHT!

TO THE *SQUARE*! TO THE *SQUARE*! *HANG* HER FROM THE *WITCH'S* TREE!

TO THE *SQUARE*! WE'LL *STRETCH* HER NECK!

WE'LL DRIVE THE DEMON OUT!

HANG THE WITCH!

HANG THE WITCH!

AM I TO *MEET* THE GODS LIKE *THIS*? DELIVERED BY A *MOB* OF SEETHING *MADMEN*?

GREAT TARIM, *HOW* HAVE I *OFFENDED* THEE?

HANG THE WITCH!

MAKE IT *TIGHT*! MAKE IT *FAST*-- LEST SHE TURN INTO A *BAT* AND *ELUDE* US!

NOW STAND BACK WHILE *DELORES GARDE* SENDS THIS DEVIL BACK TO *HELL*!

IT'S THE *WIDOW VALEK*!

SOUNDS LIKE SHE'S BEING *TORTURED*!

WIDOW! WHAT IS IT?

WHAT'S *HAPP*--?

MY *NEPHEW!* THE *DEMON* GOT HIM ONLY THIS VERY *MOMENT!*

TURNED TO *STONE* LIKE THE *OTHERS!*

AYE, JUST LIKE *REJAK* IN THE *TAVERN* AND--

BUT IF *THIS* JUST HAPPENED, THEN THAT *GIRL* WE CAUGHT COULDN'T... *COULDN'T...*

BY THE *GODS!* WE'VE *HANGED* AN *INNOCENT GIRL!*

QUICKLY! WE MAY *YET* BE IN TIME!

NAY! SHE'S *DEAD* FOR SURE BY *NOW!*

WHAT IN THE NAME OF THE *GODS--*

GONE! SHE *WAS* THE WITCH! THEN!

LOOK! *THERE'S* YOUR ANSWER! THE *HALF-WIT'S* GOT HER!

EEEE! SHE'D BE BETTER OFF *HANGED!*

SHALL WE *CHASE* HIM, THEN?

NOT I! I WOULDN'T CHASE THAT *MONSTROSITY* WITH AN *ARMY* OF MEN!

COME. WE'LL HELP THE WIDOW *BURY* HER CHILD...

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

SLUGGISHLY THE **SENSES** RETURN ONE BY ONE... FIRST **SOUND**: A FAINT, HOLLOW DRIPPING... THEN **TOUCH**: A LIGHT **PRICKLY** SENSATION ON THE CHEST... THEN, AT LAST, **SIGHT**...

AGGGH!

=HEH-HEH!=

AM I IN *HELL* THEN?

=HEH-HEH!= THAT JUST OLD ***DANIEL***! HE NOT ***HURT*** YOU 'LESS I ***TELL*** HIM! ***NO ONE*** HURT YOU NOW. YOU IN ***UNKAS'*** CAVE. NO ONE KNOW WHERE ***FIND*** YOU! =HEH-HEH!=

COME, DANIEL...

VILLAGERS THINK YOU ***GORGON***! (=HEH-HEH!=) AND THEY CALL ***ME*** IDIOT! I SEE YOU RIDE UP! YOU NOT ***GORGON***! YOU NOT GOT ***SNAKES*** FOR HAIR. YOU GOT SHINY HAIR, ***PRETTY***!

WHERE'S MY SWORD?

YOU NOT ***TRUST*** UNKAS, EH? HIM ***BIG*** STRONG BEAR... YOU ***LITTLE*** SOFT FAWN... LITTLE FAWN WITH ***PRETTY*** RED HAIR... =HEH-HEH!=

=HEH-HEH!=... ***HERE*** SWORD! YOU ***TAKE***! ***GO*** NOW! UNKAS STEAL YOU ***HORSE***. VILLAGERS NOT ***FIND*** YOU...

I ***OWE*** YOU ONE, UNKAS, AND RED SONJA ***ALWAYS*** PAYS HER DEBTS-- BUT I'M NOT READY TO QUIT THIS VILLAGE ***QUITE*** YET.

YOU ***NOT*** STAY! IF VILLAGERS NOT KILL YOU, ***GORGON*** WILL!

I'LL LEAVE, MY FRIEND, BUT ***NOT*** BEFORE MY EYES HAVE SEEN THAT WHICH CAN ***TERRIFY*** AN ENTIRE TOWNSHIP.

TO ***LOOK*** UPON THE GORGON IS ***DEATH***!

THANKS FOR THE ***HORSE***, UNKAS!

AT THE OUTSKIRTS OF TOWN, SONJA TETHERS HER STEED AND SLIPS FURTIVELY AMONG THE VILLAGE SHADOWS...

NOW WE'LL SEE WHETHER IT'S REALITY SUPERSTITION THAT RULES THESE STRANGE FOLK...

STRANGE... NO ONE HOME HERE.

WHO DARES TO WALK THE STREETS AT NIGHT WITH A DEMON LOOSE?

AND HERE TOO!

HAVE THE TOWNSPEOPLE ABANDONED THIS VILLAGE IN TERROR?

WHAT'S THAT?

VOICES IN THE DISTANCE!

IT'S A CHANT!

SOUNDS LIKE "GORGON... GORGON..."

THERE'S A LIGHT AHEAD! THAT LOOKS LIKE THE VILLAGE SQUARE!

TARIM AND ERLIK!

GORGON!

GORGON!

A FLOOD OF **RAW ANGER** WELLS UP WITHIN THE LITHE HYRKANIAN, AS SHE WATCHES THE **HAPLESS FORM** BELOW...

A SACRIFICE!

NEVER HAVE I BEHELD A GROUP OF **ANIMALS** LIKE THESE WHO CALL THEM-SELVES **MEN**...

BY THE **GODS**, I'LL NOT **STAND BY** AND WATCH THIS **CARNAGE**.

IF IT'S A **DEMON** THEY WANT, I'LL **GIVE** THEM ONE!

HI-YAHHHH!

COWARDS! **RELEASE** THE GIRL OR BE **SLAIN** WHERE YOU STAND!

ONE OF TEN PAGES IN THIS EDITION NOT SCANNED FROM THE ORIGINAL ART.

THIS TIME...

...I'LL NOT BE SLOWED...

...BY A BROKEN CHANDELIER!

WHAT'S THIS? I'VE ALWAYS KNOWN I PRESENTED A FORMIDABLE SIGHT, BUT--

AH! AND ARE YOU THE GORGON, THEN?

COME, DEMON! LET'S SEE YOUR HEAD -- ELSE HOW SHALL I REMOVE IT FROM YOUR SHOULDERS?

ARE YOU DEAF, DEMON? I SAID REMOVE YOUR--

MOTHER OF MITRA!

...OR DID I HAVE HELP?

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

THOSE *EYES!* I... I CAN'T *M-MOVE...*

...MY ARMS... LEGS... T-TURNING TO *LEAD!*

IT'S *T-TRUE!* I-I'M BECOMING LIKE THE *R-REST...* I'M TURNING TO...

...*STONE!*

NEXT MORNING:

IS IT *SHE?*

AYE, IT IS THE *RED-HAIRED* ONE... THE *STRANGER...* TURNED TO *STONE* LIKE THE OTHERS.'

WE *WARNED* HER!

TRUE! MAN DOES NOT *LOOK* UPON THE FACE OF THE GORGON AND *LIVE...*

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

WHILE, MILES FROM THE VILLAGE... AND FAR BELOW IT...

TARIM'S BLOOD!

=HEH-HEH!= SECOND TIME DANIEL BRING YOU BACK FROM DEAD!

THIS TIME, THOUGH, YOU REALLY IN HELL...

UNKAS! WHERE ARE WE? WHY THESE BARS?

WE IN GORGON'S CAVE NOW. =HEH-HEH!= SHE BRING YOU HERE LAST NIGHT. YOU THINK YOU WAKE UP DEAD, I BET! =HEH HEH!=

COME! GORGON NOT HERE NOW! I SHOW YOU CAVE!

SEE? SEE? ALL VILLAGERS... ALL CAPTURED BY GORGON! TOWN THINK THEY DEAD-- TURNED TO STONE! WE KNOW DIFFERENT! =HEH-HEH!=

I DON'T UNDER-STAND, UNKAS. THESE PEOPLE ARE THE GORGON'S PRISONERS? WHY?

GORGON? =HEH-HEH-HEH!= HEH!= HERE GORGON! HERE GORGON! YOU FOOLED LIKE ALL REST.

A MASK! THEN YOU'RE THE--

GORGON HATE THEM! HATE THEM ALL! THEY CRUEL... EVIL... SHE PUNISH THEM. =HEH-HEH!=

BUT WHY AREN'T I DEAD? I FELT THE GORGON TURN ME INTO--

NO, NOT QUITE! IT IS I WHO DON THE GORGON MASK... I WHO BROUGHT YOU HERE.

YOU! THE ONE WHO HANGED ME!

DELORES GARDE BY NAME. YES, I HANGED YOU...

...BUT NOT BEFORE INJECTING A POWERFUL POTION INTO YOUR THIGH WITH THIS RING, AND ARRANGING FOR UNKAS TO "SAVE" YOU WHILE THE VILLAGERS WERE CONVENIENTLY DISTRACTED BY THE WIDOW'S NEPHEW.

THE POTION PARALYZED THE LIMBS -- ONLY FOR A SHORT TIME -- BUT LONG ENOUGH TO ALLOW ME TO REMOVE THE VICTIM AND REPLACE HIM WITH A STONE LIKENESS...

IT TAKES A FULL DAY TO BECOME EFFECTIVE, BUT I'VE USED IT ON OVER HALF THE VILLAGE NOW...

EXCHANGING THEIR PARALYZED BODIES FOR GRANITE COPIES...

BUT HOW... WHY?

THE BODY IS BROUGHT HERE AND A CLAY MOLD FORMED AROUND IT. THAT MOLD IS REMOVED AND WAX IS POURED INTO IT.

PLASTER IS POURED AROUND THE WAX MOLD, AND WHEN IT HARDENS, HOT, LIQUID ROCK POURED INTO IT. THE WAX RUNS OFF AND THE GORGON'S "VICTIM" FORMED WITHIN.

EIGHTEEN YEARS AGO, MY PARENTS WERE STONED TO DEATH IN THE VILLAGE -- FOR BEARING A CHILD WHO WAS DEFORMED IN MIND AND BODY.

THE CHILD WAS REARED SECRETLY IN THIS CAVE BY ME WHILE I LIVED WITH MY FOSTER PARENTS.

THAT CHILD IS MY BROTHER...

UNKAS!

=HEH-HEH!=

BUT ENOUGH! I TOLD YOU NEVER TO LET THE PRISONERS OUT OF THEIR CAGES, UNKAS!

PUT HER BACK!

UNKAS SORRY... TRIED TO WARN YOU... STOLE YOU HORSE... NOW YOU SLAVE LIKE OTHERS.

=UFFF!=

SONJA SORRY TOO. UNKAS, BUT IF I LET YOU PUT ME IN THAT CAGE AGAIN, I'LL NEVER GET OUT!

=AAGHH!=

HAH! TO HARM UNKAS IS TO HARM HIS FRIENDS!

FOOL!

THEN LET'S SEE IF WE CAN REMEDY THE SITUATION...

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

...AND MAKE THEM THINK IT'S *YOU* WHOSE ATTACKING HIM!

=AGHHHH!= GET THEM OFF ME!

EEEEEEEE!

SISTER!

HURRY! HE WON'T BE *OCCUPIED* FOR LONG!

YOU! YOU *CAUSE* THIS!

UNKAS KILL!!

SHOULD WE *HELP* HER?

NOT *ME!* I'M GETTING *OUT* WHILE I CAN STILL *RUN!*

LIFTED IN A **BEAR HUG**, SONJA FINDS HER BACK BEING **CRUSHED**.. HER HOPE **FLED**..

--UNLESS-- PERHAPS--

SQUEEZING THE VERMIN UNTIL IT IS CRAZED WITH FEAR AND ANGER, THE FLAME-HAIRED BARBARIAN THRUSTS IT INTO THE HALF-WIT'S DETERMINED FACE...

DANIEL! NO- :AGGH!:

BLIND! I-I'M BLIND! NOOOOO!

WRETCHED CREATURE... MITRA HELP HIM!

MY SWORD!

TARIM'S BLOOD! HE'LL SHATTER THAT SWORD IF HE DOESN'T SHATTER ME FIRST!

AGGH!

HE HAS THE EARS OF A STAG HOUND! IF I CAN GET TO THAT PILE OF WEAPONS...

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

KA-ZEE-ZEE-ZEE-ZEE!

DANIEL!

UNHH!

UNKAS KILL!

UNKAS KILL!

ERLIK'S CURSES! HE *BLOCKS* THE ONLY *EXIT*, AND I COULDN'T WIELD A *SWORD* NOW IF I *WANTED* TO...

...AND MITRA *KNOWS* I *WANT* TO!

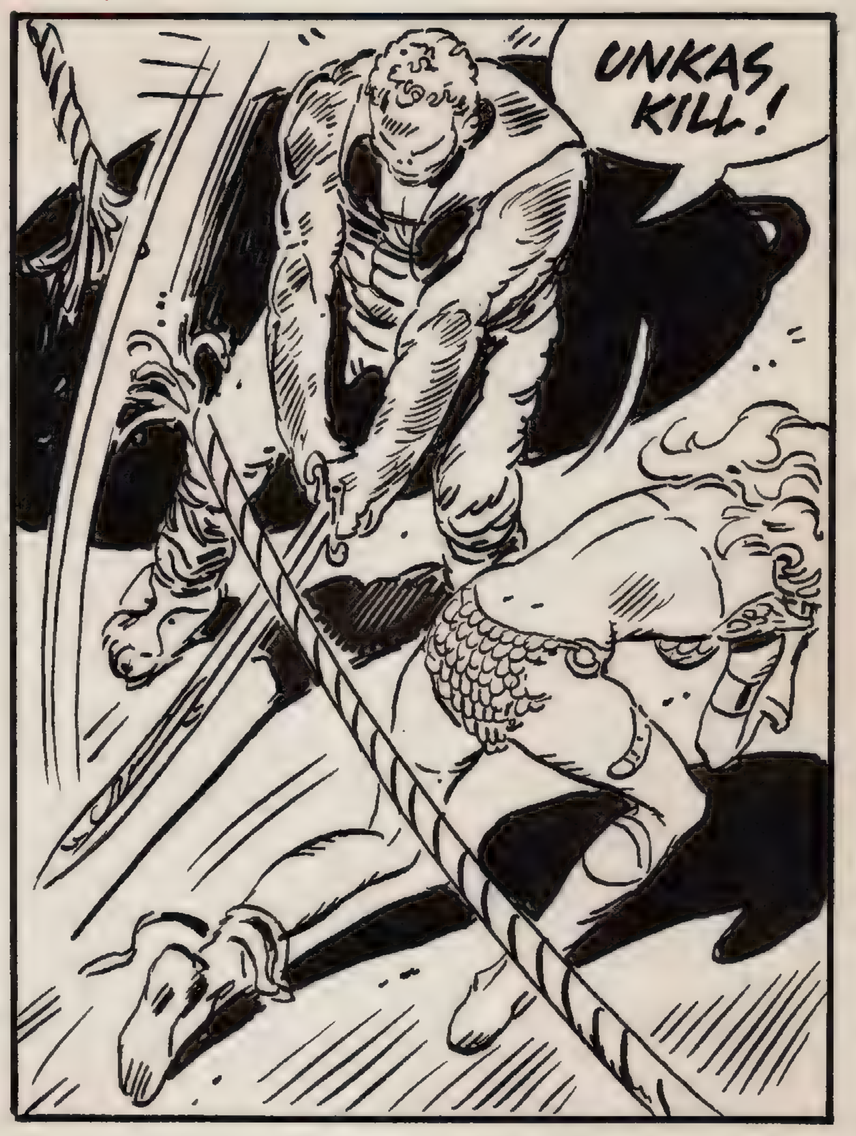
ONE *CHANCE*... BEFORE HE *BLUNDERS* INTO ME...

THAT *ROPE*--!

AGGH!

LOSING *BLOOD*... WEAK...!

PULLING HERSELF UP ON THE TAUT LENGTH OF HEMP, SONJA USES THE LAST OF HER STRENGTH TO GIVE VENT TO A FINAL SCREAMING CRY...
UNKAS! HERE I AM, YOU BUMBLING CLOWN!



NEXT: THE BEAR GOD STRIKES!

SONJA #5 -1 Marv. Feat 15 1

"Know also, O prince, that in those selfsame days that Conan the Cimmerian did stalk the Hyborian kingdoms, one of the few swords worthy to cross with his was that of Red Sonja, warrior-woman out of majestic Hyrkania. Forced to flee her homeland because she spurned the advances of a king and slew him instead, she rode west across the Turanian Steppes and into the shadowed mists of legendry."

—*The Nemedian Chronicles.*

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JAVEL

RAIN! ENDLESS **TORRENTS** OF IT, ERUPTING FROM THE BOILING SKIES IN **INEXHAUSTIBLE** DRIVING SHEETS, POUNDING INTO **FLESH** AND **SOUL** WITH MONOTONOUS TORTURE...

RAIN! A **DELUGE** OF BIBLICAL PROPORTIONS AND **SLEDGE-HAMMER** FORCE... SCATTERING WILD-LIFE TO THE HILLS, SLIDING HILLS INTO RIVERS, SWELLING RIVERS INTO **RAGING**, DESTRUCTIVE FLOODS...

RAIN! A **CEASELESS** BILLOWING CURTAIN OF MOISTURE, CUTTING VISIBILITY TO MERE **YARDS**... DRIVING TOWNS-FOLK TO THEIR HOMES, LEAVING THE HOMELESS **SODDEN** AND WEARY BENEATH ITS OPRESSION...

BOUNTY!
1,000 GOLD PIECES
to he who Lays claim by show of **EVIDENCE** the slaughter OF THE **FOREST BEAST!**
PAYMENT TO BE COLLECTED AT OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

...LEAVING THE **PENNILESS** BITTER WITH DESPERATION, AND EAGER FOR ANY **EXCUSE** TO QUIT ITS UN-ENDING HARASSMENT...

THE BEAR GOD WALKS!

BRUCE JONES WRITER | FRANK THORNE ARTIST
D. WARFIELD COLORIST | ROY THOMAS EDITOR

HEAR ME, PEOPLE OF YORKIN! GATHER ABOUT ME!

CAST YOUR EYES ON OUR HAMLET'S LATEST *SHAME!* AYE! IT'S THE BODY OF A *CHILD!*

AND WHAT *HORRORS* LIE BENEATH THIS BLOOD-STAINED CLOTH I CANNOT FIND HEART TO *SHOW* YOU!

SUCH *WANTON* MUTILATION SICKENS THE VERY *SOUL!*

YOU KNOW FULL WELL THE *TAKER* OF THIS FLEDGLING'S LIFE! AYE! THE *FOREST BEAST!*

THE *BEAR GOD* HIMSELF! AND *HERE...* WITHIN OUR WALLS THIS VERY *MORNING!*

YOU'VE SEEN THE *BOUNTY* POSTED! IT'S CULLED FROM YOUR *OWN* PURSES!

NOW, GIVE ME THE MAN WHO *DARES* TO FACE THIS *DAEMON-BEAST* AND COLLECT THAT WEIGHTY *REWARD!*

STEP *FORWARD!* *COME!* ONE AMONG YOU MUST HAVE THE *COURAGE...* MUST NEED THE *GOLD!*

SPEAK UP! YOUR VILLAGE *NEEDS* YOU!

WELL! DO TUSAN'S *SHARD EYES* ESPY A *PRETTY FACE* BENEATH THAT WATER-LOGGED MANE?

WE NEED A MAN OF *STRENGTH...* OF *HEART...*

COME TO ANSWER OUR MAYOR'S *NOBLE* CHALLENGE, OR JUST IN OUT OF THE RAIN?

DEAR ME... YOUR *RIBS* ARE SHOWING, GIRL! HOW LONG SINCE YOU'VE EATEN? NOT THAT I MIND GAZING ON SO *LOVELY* A SET OF RIBS...

IS THERE NO MAN *AMONG* YOU?

FOR *THAT* MATTER, THE *LEGS* AREN'T BAD EITHER... NOR THE *HAIR*, NOR--

I ACCEPT!

A WOMAN! BY THE GODS!

IS THAT THE BEST THIS MISERABLE VILLAGE CAN MUSTER? HAVE YOU NO SHAME?

NONE AT ALL, YOUR HONOR! HOWEVER, I CAN SEE THE DISTINCT ADVANTAGE OF ESCORTING SO LOVELY A BOUNTY-HUNTER THROUGH OUR WOODLAND GLENS IN PURSUIT OF THIS BEAST!

I THEREFORE OFFER MY SERVICES, AS WELL!

I WORK BEST ALONE, YOUR HONOR!

ALL ARE FREE TO JOIN THIS WORTHY CAUSE.

NOW, WHO ELSE AMONG YOU...

WRONG WAY, LASS! THE BEAR GOD WAS LAST SEEN IN THE WEST WOOD!

I WARN YOU, DON'T ATTEMPT TO FOLLOW ME!

HOW UNGRACIOUS! AND HERE I WAS ABOUT TO OFFER YOU A DRY INN AND A WARM MEAL AT MY EXPENSE...

HYRKANIA, IS IT? THEN YOU'RE A LONG WAY FROM HOME!

HOW CAME YOU TO THIS WORTHLESS ZINGARAN HAMLET?

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

YOU HAVE DRINK WITH BRAMUS, RED HAIR?

HOLD! THE LADY'S WITH ME!

YOU HAVE DRINK WITH BRAMUS?

HA, HA, HA! THE CEASELESS MOUTH CEASETH AT LAST! HA, HA, HA!

BRAMUS ASK YOU QUESTION...

BRAMUS MY LOVE... THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT YOUR VIRILE MANNER AND MANLY BEARING--

--THAT MAKES ME SICK!

HA, HA, HA! HAVING TROUBLE FINDING YOUR FEET?

BRAMUS KILL!

STEADY THERE, AMOROUS ONE... ROUGH TERRAIN!

BLAST YOU, SONJA THAT BIG PIG HURT MY WRIST!

WHO YOU CALL PIG?

HA-HA! YOU TWO HAVE QUITE AN ACT THERE! HA-HA-HA!

BRAMUS KILL!

CLUMSY OAF THAT'S MY BROTHER!

AYE? WELL, HERE'S ONE FOR YOUR SISTER!

HO-NOW, A FIGHT!

THANK, MITRA! I WAS GETTING BORED TO TEARS!

ISHTAR TAKE ME-- I PREFER THE DRIVING RAIN TO THIS!

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

...HER LIPS AND HAIR ARE *FLAMING* RED... AH, SONJA *ADDLES* A YOUNG MAN'S HEAD...

REMARKABLE! NOT *ONCE* IN SIX MILES HAVE YOU *REMAINED ON KEY*...

'TIS NOT THE *TUNE* BUT THE *WORDS* WHICH YET WILL WIN YOU TO ME, FAIR LOVE.

AH! NOW *THERE'S* A SIGHT TO WARM THE *COCKLES* OF YOUR HEART.

WHO *ARE* THEY?

BOUNTY-HUNTERS LIKE US, MOST PROBABLY. LOOKS LIKE THE GOOD *MAYOR* FOUND A FEW MORE HEARTY RECRUITS.

NOW ISN'T THAT *SILLY* OF ME... I FORGOT TO BRING THE OTHER *TENT*...

HOW *INCONVENIENT*.

DEAR ME, AND ONLY *ONE* BLANKET! I *REALLY* MUST PAY MORE ATTENTION TO DETAIL.

I *DO* HOPE THERE'LL BE ENOUGH ROOM FOR THE *TWO* OF US!

I'M CONFIDENT YOU'LL THINK OF *SOMETHING*.

JUST LET ME *KNOW* IF I *CROWD* YOU...

TUSAN... THERE'S A DEFINITE *DISARMING* QUALITY TO YOUR OBNOXIOUSNESS...

I THOUGHT YOU'D *NEVER* NOTICE...

LISTEN! WHAT'S *THAT*?

THE POUNDING OF MY *HEART*, LOVE...

SHH! LISTEN! FOOTSTEPS!

MMMM... PERHAPS WE'VE *FOUND* THE *BEAR GOD* ALREADY!

OR *HE'S* FOUND *US*...!

I'M COMING *WITH* YOU...

YOU'RE *STAYING!* ONE OF US HAS TO GUARD THE TENT FROM THESE *BRIGANDS* AROUND US.

KEEP YOUR *HEARTH* WARM...

TUSAN?

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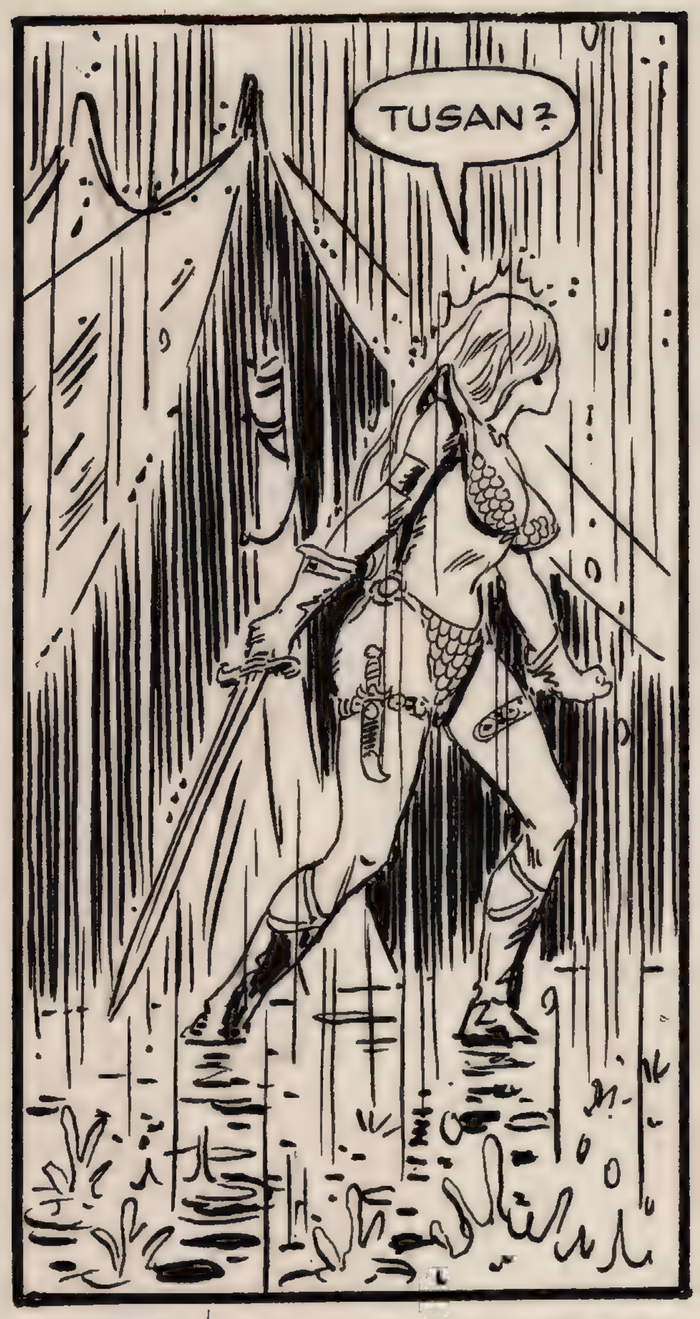
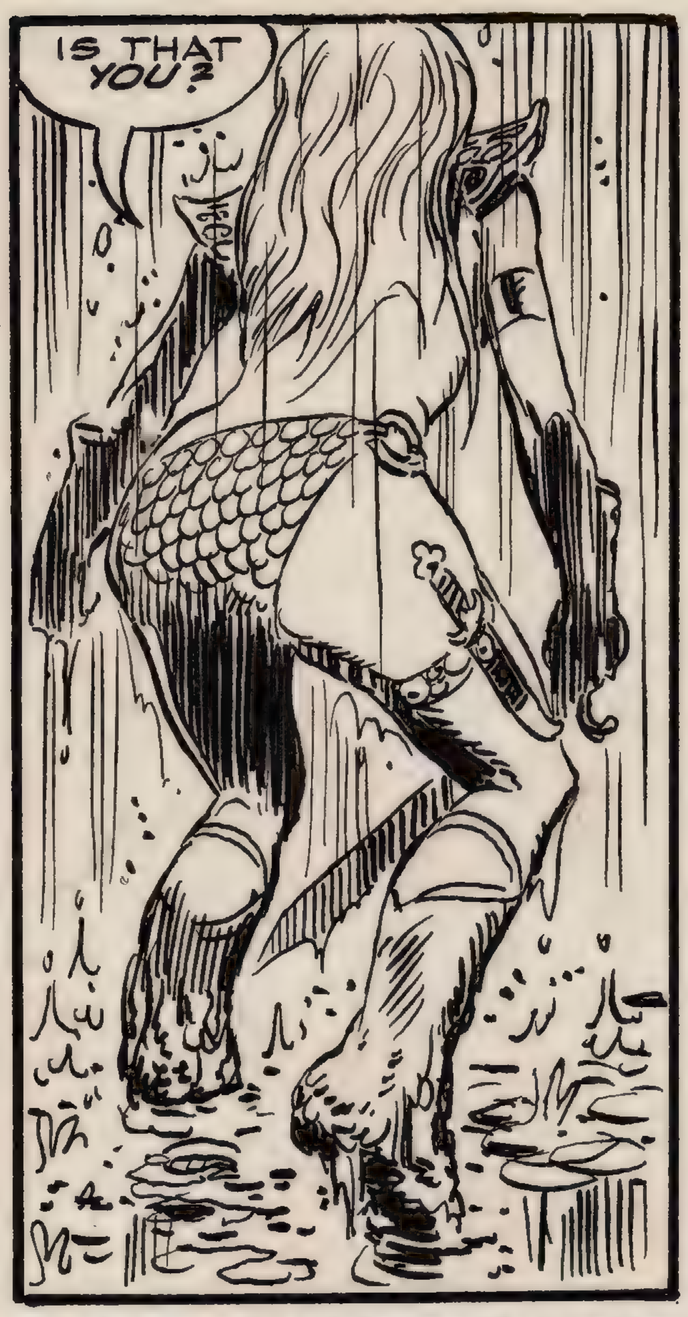
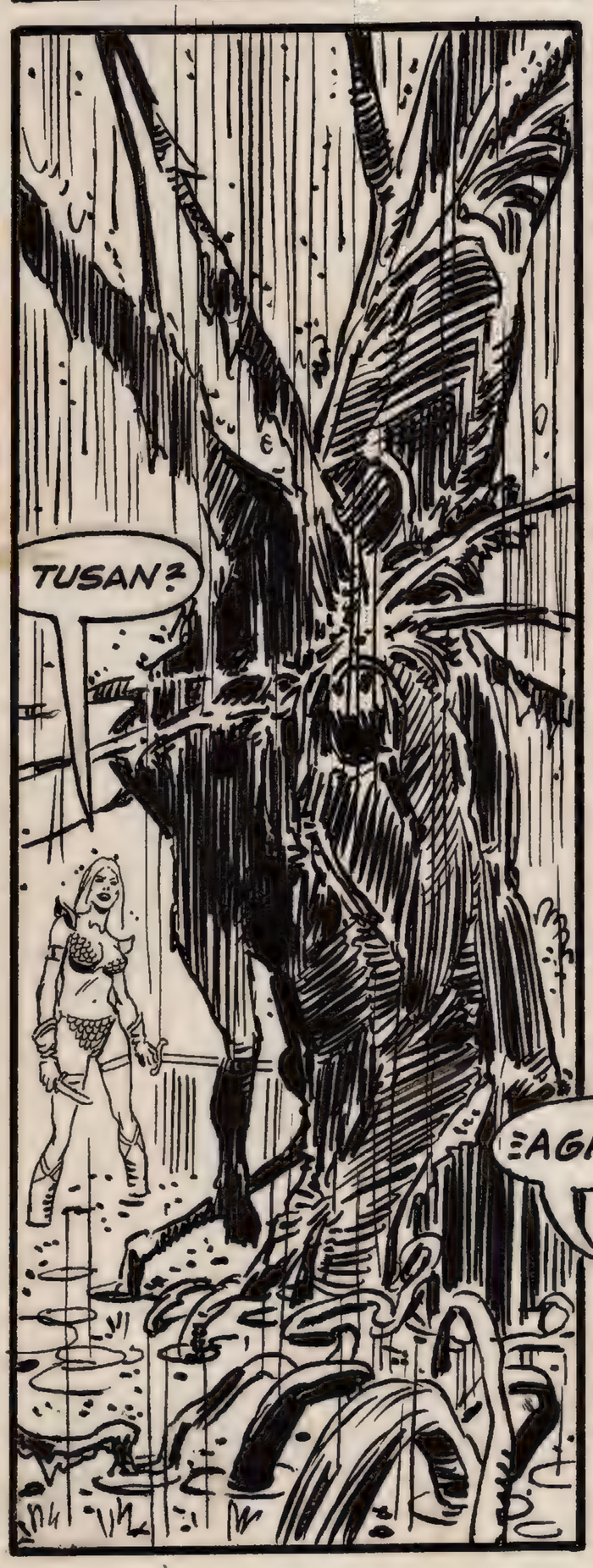

TUSAN?


IS THAT YOU?


TUSAN?
AGHH!!

MOTHER OF MITRA!

NOT A PRETTY *SIGHT*, IS IT, LASS?

BLAST YOU, TUSAN! *SNEAKING* UP ON ME LIKE THAT! I MIGHT HAVE *GUTTED* YOU!

I'M *IMPRESSED* TUSAN. YOUR *ART TALENT* FAR EXCEEDS YOUR *SINGING*.

AND YOU SAY THE *CREATURE* HAS HAUNTED YOUR VILLAGE FOR *THREE CENTURIES*?

AT *LEAST*! WHICH PLACES IT *OUT* OF THE REALM OF *MORTALITY* AND INTO THE *SUPERNATURAL*...

THAT IS, *IF* ONE CARES TO *BELIEVE* IN THE SUPER-NATURAL...

YOU HAVE A *BETTER* EXPLANATION?

I *MIGHT*. IT *COULD* BE THAT--

EEEAGH!

YOU PLAY HOUSEKEEPER THIS TIME!

SONJA, WAIT!

BEEEEEEEEE

IT CAME FROM *THAT* DIRECTION... I *THINK*!

CURSE THIS DAMNED RAIN!

=UHHN--!=

GREAT ERLIK!

THE BEAST SEEKS TO *RID* THE FOREST OF BOUNTY-HUNTERS...

I'D BEST GET *OUT* OF--

...HERE...

IT APPEARS DAZED! PERHAPS I CAN--

GODS OF MY FATHERS!

SWEET MITRA! IT WILL TEAR ME ASUNDER!

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

ONE OF TEN PAGES IN THIS EDITION NOT SCANNED FROM THE ORIGINAL ART.

UH ... MY *HEAD* THE BEAR GOD... *GONE*...

WH-WHAT'S *THIS*?

A BEAR HIDE...

A *COSTUME!*

WHAT *WAS* IT *TUSAN* SAID ABOUT *MORTALITY*?

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

TUSAN!

I... I WENT OUT *LOOKING* FOR YOU, SONJA. SOMEONE *ATTACKED* ME IN THE DARKNESS. I CAME BACK TO BE SURE OUR BELONGINGS WERE *SAFE*...

AYE? AND WHAT OF *THIS?*

COULDN'T BE THAT YOU'VE BEEN *CUTTING* BACK THE *COMPETITION* WITH THIS, COULD IT, BRAVO?

SONJA, WHAT ARE YOU-- *AGGHH!*

SPEAK WHEN *SPOKEN* TO, SWINE! OR SHOULD I *INCREASE* THE PAIN OF MY *ORIGINAL* WOUND?

SONJA! I *SWEAR*--

YES, *SWEAR*, HONEY TONGUE! JUST AS YOU *SWORE* YOUR ARDOR FOR ME!

WHAT IN THE NAME OF--?

BRAMUS!

AS I *SUSPECTED*: IN LEAGUE WITH THE *MAYOR* TO ELIMINATE ALL BOUNTY-HUNTERS AND *SPLIT* THE *REWARD* BETWEEN THEM!

THEN THE BEAR-GOD WAS--

A *MYTH*, RESURRECTED BY OUR NOBLE *FOUNDING FATHER* TO SWELL HIS *OWN* GREEDY PURSE!

BRAMUS KILL!

TUSAN!

SONJA!

HE'S *SPREADING* THE *TORCH* OIL!

BRAMUS BIDS YOU *FAREWELL*...

ED AFTER NEXT PAGE

TH-THE REAL BEAR G--

TUSAN, QUICKLY! HE'S GOING TO DROP THE FLAME!

THE FOREST GOD *DIES*... TAKING THE *FOREST* WITH HIM...

GLORY TO THE *GODS*, TUSAN! *IT'S STOPPED RAINING!*

MY *APOLOGIES* FOR MY EARLIER ACCUSATION. HOW DO YOU *FEEL*?

BETTER. BUT HOW WILL WE KEEP *WARM* OUT HERE ALL *ALONE* UNTIL MORNING?

YOU'LL BUILD A *FIRE*, MY MAN...

YOU'LL BUILD A *FIRE*!

NEXT: IBIS THE INVINCIBLE!

"Know also, O prince, that in those selfsame days that Conan the Cimmerian did stalk the Hyborian kingdoms, one of the few swords worthy to cross with his was that of Red Sonja, warrior-woman out of majestic Hyrkania. Forced to flee her homeland because she spurned the advances of a king and slew him instead, she rode west across the Turanian Steppes and into the shadowed mists of legendry."

—*The Nemedian Chronicles.*

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ARGOS IS A KINGDOM OF **SEAPORTS**, EACH GLARING OUT TO SEA WITH A KEENESS AND AN AVARICE TO PUT THE **GOD OF GREED** TO SHAME.

BUT, TO **REACH** THOSE PORTS FROM THE UPLANDS OF **ZINGARA**, ONE MUST PASS ALONG **ROADS** THRU KNIFE-EDGED **RAVINES**...

...WHERE ONE'S SENSE OF **IMPENDING DANGER** IS AS VITAL AS A NEWLY-SHARPENED **SWORD**...!

BEWARE THE SACRED SONS OF SET!

ROY THOMAS
WRITER/EDITOR

FRANK THORNE
ARTIST/LETTERER

GEORGE ROUSSOS
COLORIST

FEATURING CHARACTERS CREATED BY
ROBERT E. HOWARD

MARVEL FEATURE

6

2

IT WAS ONLY THE SLIGHTEST SCRAPING OF **PEBBLES**, PERHAPS -- OR JUST THE HINT OF A SHADOW MOVING **WITHIN** A SHADOW--

BUT, IT HAS PROVED **ENOUGH**...

...ENOUGH FOR SONJA OF HYRKANIA TO **EVADE** THE DARK FORM THAT HURTLES TOWARD HER...

...AND THEN, **BEFORE** IT CAN FULLY **RISE** TO ITS FEET...

...TO MAKE **CERTAIN** IT WILL **NEVER RISE AGAIN!**

HI-- YAAA!

SO- MASKED ASSASSINS HUNT IN **PAIRS** ON THE ROAD TO **VENZIA**, DO THEY?

I'VE ALWAYS **HEARD** THAT ALL ARGOSSEANS WERE COWARDLY **JACKALS**--

BUT, *ERLIK* TAKE ME IF I EVER HEARD OF THEM *DRESSING* THE PART, TO BOOT!

THOUGH, COME TO THINK OF IT-- IT MAY WELL BE AN *IMPROVEMENT* ON WHAT YOU LOOK LIKE *WITHOUT* THE MASK.

WELL, DOG? CAN'T YOU *SPEAK*?

TAKE OFF THE MASK, I SAY-- AND SHOW ME THE *TRUE* FACE OF A SKULKER ALONG ROADS--

--UNLESS--THAT *IS* YOUR TRUE FACE--!?

IT IS A **SMALL** *THING WHICH CHANGES THE WOMAN'S TONE, FROM ONE OF SCORNFUL* **DISBELIEF** *TO THAT OF ABRUPT* **DOUBT.**

A **SMALL** *THING, LIKE THE FLARING OF ELONGATED* **NOSTRILS**... *A GNASHING OF YELLOWED* **FANGS**... *THE SQUINTING OF THE* **EYES**...!

NEVER WAS A MASK MADE SO **FLEXIBLE**-- SO RESPONSIVE TO EACH **TWITCH** OF ITS WEARER'S FACE!

THEN--IT IS **TRUE**!

STILL, IF SONJA NEEDS **PROOF** *THAT A CREATURE CAN* **COMBINE** *THE WORST ATTRIBUTES OF BOTH* **MAN** *AND* **JACKAL**...

...THEY ARE LAID TO **REST** THE NEXT MOMENT!

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

WITH AN AGILE LEAP, THE FEARSOME ASSAILANT IS UPON HER...

...AND, JUST AS QUICKLY, OFF AGAIN!

I SWEAR BY BY HOLY *TARIM!* SILENT ONE...

...YOU'VE AROUSED MY *CURIOSITY*, FOR WHICH YOU SHOULD BE *PROUD!*

IT'S ONE OF THE *FEW* WAYS I STILL ACKNOWLEDGE MY *WOMANHOOD.*

I *MUST* LEARN IF IT'S A *MAN'S* HEAD YOU TRULY SPORT-- OR A *SCAVENGER'S...*

...AND THERE'S BUT *ONE* WAY I KNOW TO *FIND OUT!*

MITRA! IT *WAS* AN ANIMAL'S HEAD-- ATTACHED TO A HAIRY FORM WHICH WAS MOSTLY A *MAN'S!*

WHAT *MADNESS* IS THIS??

BUT, CORPSES-- WHETHER OF MAN *OR* BEAST--ARE NOT GIVEN TO *ANSWERS...*

AND SO, AN UNEASY SONJA CONTINUES ALONG THE WINDING ROAD TOWARD VENZIA, TILL, COME DAYBREAK...

DAMN THE LUCK! THE BRIDGE IS OUT--AND I KNOW OF NO OTHER FOR MILES!

WELL, HORSE-- IT LOOKS AS IF THIS IS WHERE WE BOTH GET WET.

TIMES LIKE THESE, I'M GLAD I WEAR LIGHT ARMOR UPON THE ROAD. I--

HOLD! WHO'S THAT--

--COMING DOWN THE ROAD WHICH CONVERGES ON THIS ONE?

GREETINGS, SONJA OF HYRKANIA!

I AM KARANTHES, ONCE OF STYGIA, MOST RECENTLY OF NEMEDIA.

AT LAST OUR PATHS CROSS, AS IT WAS WRITTEN IN THE ENTRAILS OF BIRDS.

DOWN, NOW-- GENTLY, I SAY...

I WOULD HAVE A WORD WITH RED SONJA, EVEN IF IT MEANS I MUST VIOLATE THE CUSTOM, AND LET MY FEET TOUCH ALIEN SOIL.

OF COURSE, I STILL WEAR MY SANDALS...

WHO ARE YOU BESIDES A TALKATIVE OLD MAN?

A PRIEST OF SORTS, THAT'S OBVIOUS, BUT OF WHOM--?

MY GOD IS IBIS, WOMAN. IBIS THE INVINCIBLE, GOD-BIRD OF SHADOW-HAUNTED STYGIA.

I'VE HEARD OF THAT DUSKY LAND, WHERE THEY SAY EVIL WAS BORN.

BUT HOW DID YOU HEAR OF ME?

HEAR OF YOU? WHY, IN THE WHISPERING OF THE WINDS IN THE DISTANT CITY OF HANUMAR, GIRL...

...AND IN THE FLUTED CRIES OF THE TEMPORAL IBIS BIRD, OF COURSE...

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

THEY REVEALED YOUR *NAME* UNTO ME, AND ALSO WHERE TO *FIND* YOU.

THE REST WAS ACCOMPLISHED BY MORE *EARTHLY* MEANS.

LOOK, HOLY MAN-- I DON'T KNOW WHAT THIS IS ALL *ABOUT*, BUT STOP POINTING THAT BIRD-SHAPED *STAFF* AT ME!

IT SEEMS TO *REFLECT* THE SUN IN MY EYES-- FROM *ANY* ANGLE--

BUT ALL THE SAME, I NEVER *HEARD* OF YOUR BIRD-GOD!

NO MATTER. SURELY, YOU HAVE HEARD OF *SET*--

"--*SET*-- THE SUPREME AND SINISTER *SERPENT-GOD* OF STYGIA, WHO HAS *FOUGHT* WITH IBIS, IN THE OUTER DARKNESS, FOR A *THOUSAND CENTURIES*.

"EVEN FROM MY EXILE IN *NEMEDIA* I HAVE EVER CARRIED ON THE FIGHT:-- IN WAITING FOR *THIS MOMENT*!"

IF THIS IBIS-GOD IS SO *INVINCIBLE*, THEN HOW DID SET'S PRIESTS DRIVE YOU *OUT* OF STYGIA?

A VICTORY AMONG GODS THAT IS HELD ONLY FOR A *FEW LIFETIMES* IS NO VICTORY AT *ALL*.

I AM NOT *POWERLESS*; THINK YOU THE *BRIDGE* COLLAPSED OF ITS *OWN* ACCORD?

YOU DID THAT SOMEHOW? THEN, PERHAPS--

--*YOU SICKED THOSE JACKAL-HEADED MEN ON ME, AS WELL!?*

SO! MY FOE IS *AWARE* OF MY PLAN, IS HE-- AND TRIES TO *SLAY* MY EMISSARY, BEFORE SHE IS EVEN *APPOINTED*?

I AM SCARCELY *SURPRISED*.

BUT *NO*-- IT WAS THE MISBEGOTTEN *SONS OF SET* WHO ATTACKED YOU, NOT *I*.

HEAR ME, CHILD! THE JACKAL-MEN ARE THE MOST LOWLY OF THOSE YOU MAY FACE IN THE DAYS TO COME.

FOR, THERE IS SOMETHING I WISH YOU TO OBTAIN FOR ME.

YOU HAVE HEARD, NO DOUBT, OF THE FABLED IRON-BOUND BOOK OF SKELOS.

IT CONTAINS THE MOST FEARSOME MAGIC-LORE ON EARTH -- THE DARKEST SECRETS OF WIZARDS WHO WERE OLD WHEN ATLANTIS WAS YOUNG.

ALL THE FEW KNOWN COPIES ARE CLOSELY GUARDED, AND COMPLETE -- ALL BUT ONE, FROM WHICH SOMEHOW A PAGE WAS LATELY STOLEN --

-- SOMEHOW TO WIND ITS WAY TO A HOUSE OF RELICS IN MESSANTIA, CAPITAL OF ARGOS.

I WANT THAT PAGE -- AND YOU WILL GET IT FOR ME.

I WAS BOUND FOR VENZIA. I WOULDN'T MIND CHANGING MY DESTINATION FOR A PRICE, BUT -- MITRA!

WOULD THIS BE PRICE ENOUGH?

A JEWEL! AND THE BIGGEST I'VE SEEN SINCE I RAIDED THE KING'S PALACE IN MAKKALET!

IT IS YOURS.

AND I'LL TAKE IT! I DON'T KNOW HOW AN OUTCAST PRIEST MANAGED TO LUG SUCH TREASURES FROM STYGIA, NOR DO I --

WAIT!

TARIM'S BLOOD! THE JEWEL IS -- FADING!

IT'S GONE!

IF YOU'VE SOUGHT TO TRICK ME, HOLY MAN, I'LL --

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

THE JEWEL WOULD *NOT* HAVE VANISHED, CHILD, NOT *EVER*... IF YOU HAD FIRST DELIVERED ME THE *PRIZE* I SEEK.

I SIMPLY WISHED TO PROVE TO YOU I HAVE THE *MEANS* TO EMPLOY A MERCENARY SUCH AS YOURSELF.

WELL THEN, KARANTHES, PRIEST OF IBIS...

...A *MERCENARY* FORMERLY ON HER WAY TO *VENZIA* IS PRECISELY WHAT YOU HAVE JUST *HIRED*.

NOW, TELL ME *MORE!*

SOON, WHEN THE MAN-BORNE LITTER CARRIES THE PRIEST **BACK** ALONG THE VERY ROAD HE HAD COME...

...SONJA IS STILL WONDERING WHY, WITH KARANTHES' OBVIOUS POWERS, HE CANNOT SECURE THE COVETED PAGE FOR **HIMSELF**.

BUT, WAS THERE **EVER** A PRIEST WHO REVEALED **ALL** HIS MYSTERIES?

NOR DOES THE PUZZLE SEEM **CLEARER** TO HER BY THE TIME, DAYS LATER, SHE PASSES THRU THE LANDWARD GATE OF **MESSANTIA**, CAPITAL OF ARGOS...

...TO MEET A DESTINY OF WHICH THE **NEMEDIAN CHRONICLERS** SHALL ONE DAY WRITE.

SHE WASTES NO TIME EYEING THE **POLYGLOT POPULATION** WHICH SWARMS THE CITY'S STREETS; FOR, SHE IS A WOMAN WITH A **MISSION**...

...AND KARANTHES WILL NOT WAIT **FOREVER** FOR HER IN NORTHERN ARGOS.

THE JEWEL HAD FELT **GOOD** IN SONJA'S HAND FOR THAT MOMENT... **SO** GOOD! IN FACT...

...THAT SHE IS UNCHARACTERISTICALLY **CARELESS** IN FAILING TO OBSERVE THE **HOODED MAN** WHO, SKULKING, WATCHES HER ENTER MESSANTIA'S SOPHISTICATED **SEWER SYSTEM**...

...AND BEGIN A TREK ALONG A REPELLANT **RAINBOW** WHICH SHE HOPES, WILL LEAD TO A CROCK OF **GOLD**.

THEN, WHEN SHE IS QUITE **VANISHED** FROM SIGHT...

GO! YOU KNOW WHAT WILL **HAPPEN** TO YOU-- AND WHAT YOU MUST **DO!**

WHEN THE THREE SILENT FIGURES HAVE **LIKEWISE** GONE...

AND **YOU**, MY LITTLE FRIEND... BORN IN THE **SWAMPS** FAR SOUTH AND SENT NORTH TO BE A **CHILD'S PLAYTHING**...

...YOU SHALL BE THE LOATH-SOME MEANS OF **GREAT MAGICKS!**

IN HIS HASTE, KARANTHES DOUBTLESS DID NOT **TELL** SONJA THE POPULAR MESSANTIAN STORY:

...SO THAT **NOW**-- BLIND, ALBINO-COLORED, AND WEANED ON A DIET OF FILTH-- THEY ROAM THESE FOUL STREAMS IN SEARCH OF STRAY **RATS**...

...AND, ON OCCASION, EVEN **LARGER** PREY.

... HOW BABY **CROCODILES**, RAISED AS CHILDREN'S PETS, HAVE BEEN **DISCARDED** AS THEY GREW LARGER, INTO THE CITY'S **SEWERS**...

NOR WOULD IT HAVE DONE MUCH **GOOD**, PERHAPS, IF KARANTHES **HAD** TOLD HER THE TALE...

FOR, EVEN AS THE SWORDS-WOMAN HEARS A **SPLASHING** SOUND BEHIND HER...

... WHAT SHE SUDDENLY CONFRONTS IS NEITHER **REPTILE** NOR **MAN**, BUT SOMETHING WITH THE MOST DEADLY TRAITS OF **BOTH**!

BY ERLIK'S BLACK THRONE!

FIRST I RUN INTO **JACKAL-MEN**, AND **NOW**--!

I **BEGIN** TO SUSPECT SOMEONE DOESN'T WANT ME TO **REACH** MY DESTINATION!

ONE OF TEN PAGES IN THIS EDITION NOT SCANNED FROM THE ORIGINAL ART.

GRUNK

BUT THEN-- I NEVER *ASKED* ANYONE, DID I?

PINNED THAT ONE LIKE A SCALY *BUTTERFLY!*

ONLY-- I *DIDN'T* NOTICE THERE WERE *TWO MORE* BEHIND ME, OR I WOULDN'T HAVE TOSSED AWAY MY *SWORD.*

BUT NOW, I'D BETTER STOP *TALKING* TO MYSELF, AND DO WHAT THAT BARBAROUS ROGUE *CONAN* WOULD DO IN THE SAME SITUATION--

--NAMELY, *RUN LIKE THE DEVIL!*

WELL! SO YOU CAN *GRUNT* AT LEAST, CAN YOU?

SONJA MAY OR MAY NOT BE CORRECT IN HER ASSESSMENT OF A CERTAIN CIMMERIAN'S STRATEGIES; AFTER ALL, SHE DOESN'T KNOW HIM ALL *THAT* WELL.

IN ANY EVENT, IT MATTERS VERY *LITTLE...*

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...AS SHE FINDS HERSELF SUDDENLY TRAPPED IN A BARRED CUL-DE-SAC...

...WITH NO WAY OUT BUT A SWIRLING, GRASPING DRAIN WHICH PULLS THE WASTE OF A DIRT-ENCRUSTED CITY RELENTLESSLY OUT TO SEA.

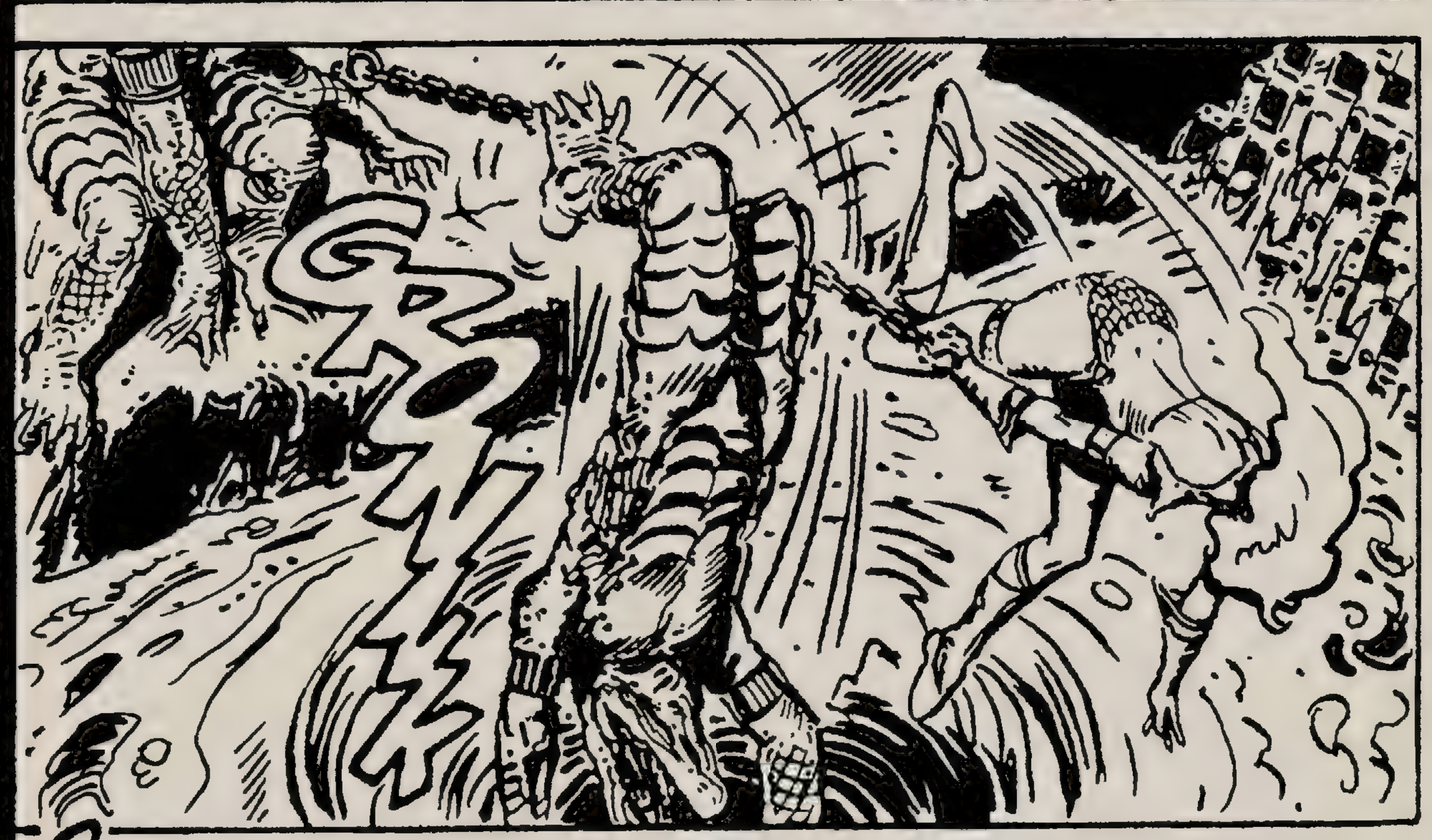
THERE IS NO LIVING FOR HER, SHE KNOWS, IN ITS SUCTION GRASP...

AND SO, WHAT SHE DOES NEXT IS NOT SHEER BRAVERY, BUT THE COURSE OF GRIM DESPERATION:

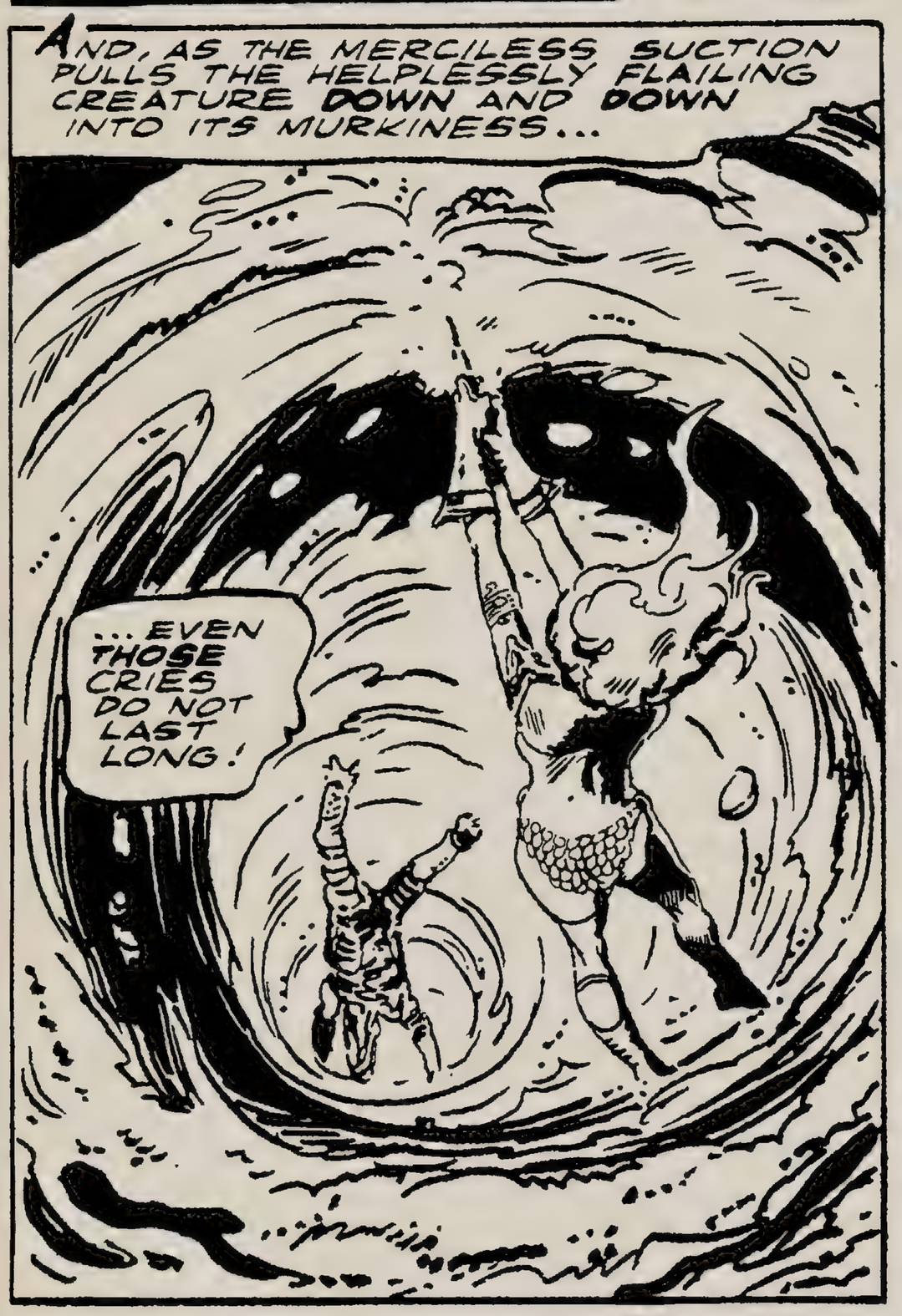
ALL RIGHT, YOU WHITE-SCALED SCUM!

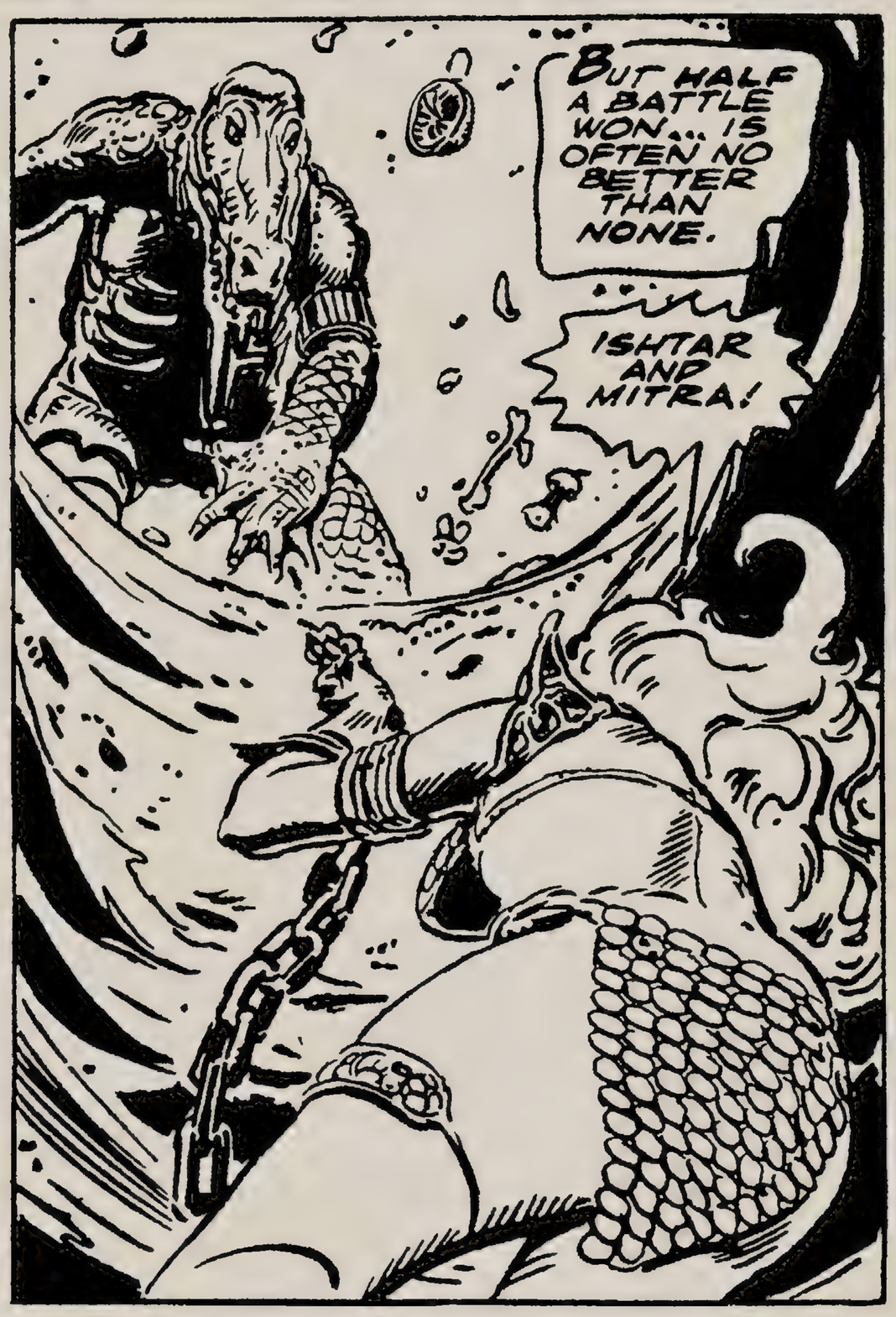
I WON'T EVEN PRETEND TO THINK YOU'RE JUST MEN IN CROCODILES' CLOTHING.

IF YOU WERE EVER MEN, SOMEONE HAS MERGED YOU NOW WITH RIVER-DRAGONS OUT OF THE SOUTH...



ONLY A FEARFUL, NIGH-PITIFUL **GRUNTING** FROM THE FALLING MAN-REPTILE REMINDS SONJA THAT HER FOES MIGHT EVER HAVE BEEN **HUMAN**...


AND, AS THE MERCILESS SUCTION PULLS THE HELPLESSLY FLAILING CREATURE **DOWN** AND **DOWN** INTO ITS MURKINESS...
...EVEN THOSE CRIES DO NOT LAST LONG!



ONE OF TEN PAGES IN THIS EDITION NOT SCANNED FROM THE ORIGINAL ART.

SILENTLY--REMORSELESSLY--THE MAN-MONSTER **REELS IN** THE WARRIOR'S CHAIN...

...WHILE SHE GAZES INTO HIS **EYES**, SUDDENLY AS MESMERIZED AS A BIRD BY A LOATHSOME **SERPENT**...

NOR DOES THE **REALITY** OF THE APPROACHING **HORROR** BURST THRU HER CONSCIOUSNESS, TILL SHE FEELS HER **WRIST** GRASPED BY A **SCALY CLAW**...

...AND HER SPINNING HEAD DRAWN **CLOSER** TO OPEN, SLAVERING JAWS NEWLY ESCAPED FROM A **MADMANS NIGHTMARE!**

NEARER THEY COME -- EVER NEARER --

-- TILL THE CERTAIN DEATH BY DROWNING THAT WAITS BELOW SEEMS ALMOST A THING TO BE DESIRED!

YET, PERHAPS THERE IS, AFTER ALL, A THIRD ALTERNATIVE:

JAWS CLOSE SLOWLY, OH SO SLOWLY -- FOR WHAT NEED TO HURRY, WHEN THE PREY CANNOT ESCAPE?

AND SO, A MOMENT MISSED -- BECOMES AN ETERNITY!

GLONK

THERE, YOU DEVIL FROM SOME SLIME-COVERED HELL--

GLOK

I PRAY TO MITRA IT'S THE MAN PART OF YOU THAT FEELS MY KNIFE'S STING--

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

FIND SOME PRAYERS, AT LEAST, THE GODS DO ANSWER...

...THOUGH NOT, IT WOULD SEEM, THOSE BREATHED IN WORDLESS PAIN BY MEN-TURNED-MONSTER!

GASPING FOR AIR AND RESPITE, THE HYRKANIAN SHE-DEVIL DRAGS HERSELF ON STRAIN-WRACKED ARMS FROM THE SWIRLING WATERS...

YET SHE DARES NOT GIVE IN TO THE WEARINESS WHICH ASSAILS HER...

AND SHE RETRACES HER STEPS, TO THE PLACE OF WHICH KARANTHES SPOKE...

...WHERE, SPYING A HALF-CRUMBLED STAIRWAY SHE PREVIOUSLY PASSED IN THE DARKNESS, SHE BEGINS TO CLIMB...

...AS SILENTLY AS EVER A NURSING LEOPARDESS CREPT UPON AN UNSUSPECTING DOE.

SHE HEARS VOICES FROM BEYOND THE DOORWAY AT THE TOP...

AND NOW, THROWING CAUTION TO THE WIND-GODS, HER SWORD AT THE READY--SHE HURLS OPEN THE LONG-FORGOTTEN DOOR--

--TO STARE IN UNDISGUISED SHOCK AT THE HUMAN TABLEAU BEFORE HER--!

YOU!

ONE OF TEN PAGES IN THIS EDITION NOT SCANNED FROM THE ORIGINAL ART.

MARVEL FEATURE

CONAN THE CIMMERIAN-- HERE!?
RED SONJA!
AYE! AND ONLY ONE OF US MAY LEAVE WITH IT..
--THOUGH IT MEAN THE OTHER'S DEATH!
THEN YOU TOO MUST HAVE COME SEEKING THE PAGE FROM THE IRON-BOUND BOOK OF SKELOS!
TO BE CONTINUED--IN THE PULSE-POUNDING PAGES OF CONAN #66!
NEXT ISSUE: THE CIMMERIAN AND TWO SHE-DEVILS!

ONE OF TEN PAGES IN THIS EDITION NOT SCANNED FROM THE ORIGINAL ART.

"Know also, O prince, that in those selfsame days that Conan the Cimmerian did stalk the Hyborian kingdoms, one of the few swords worthy to cross with his was that of Red Sonja, warrior-woman out of majestic Hyrkania. Forced to flee her homeland because she spurned the advances of a king and slew him instead, she rode west across the Turanian Steppes and into the shadowed mists of legendry."

—The Nemedian Chronicles.

Stan Lee PRESENTS: RED SONJA™

ROY THOMAS WRITER/EDITOR | FRANK THORNE ILLUSTRATOR | MICHELE WOLFMAN: COLORIST | FEATURING CHARACTERS CREATED BY ROBERT E. HOWARD

THE BATTLE OF THE BARBARIANS!

THAT HYRKANIAN HUSSY!

SO HELP ME, CONAN-- IF I BUT HAD MY BOW AND ARROW--!

THEN I THANK CROM YOU DON'T, BÊLIT.

I'D PREFER TO SETTLE THE SCORE WITH MY OWN GOOD BLADE, WHEN WE CATCH UP WITH HER!

SO, AT LAST THEY HAVE MET AGAIN, CONAN THE CIMMERIAN AND RED SONJA-- AFTER ALL THESE LONG, ADVENTURE-FILLED MONTHS!*

BUT NOW, A NEW ELEMENT HAS BEEN ADDED, IN THE PERSON OF BÊLIT, PIRATE QUEEN OF THE BLACK COAST-- AND JEALOUS LOVER OF THE BRONZED BARBARIAN...

* AS SEEN LAST ISSUE, AND IN CONAN #66-67. --ROY.

STILL, IT IS NOT THE FABLED GREEN-EYED GARGOYLE WHICH IS ON SONJA'S MIND AS HER DAPPLED MOUNT SPEEDS INTO THE ARGOSSEAN NIGHT...

...WHEN, ON THE WINDING ROAD TO MESSANTIA, CAPITAL OF ARGOS, SHE MET KARANTHES, ENIGMATIC PRIEST OF THE GOD-BIRD IBIS.

... BUT RATHER, AN EVEN STRANGER HAPPENING, A FEW DAYS EARLIER...

HE GAVE HER A MISSION: TO ACQUIRE A CERTAIN PAGE LATELY TORN FROM THE IRON-BOUND BOOK OF SKELOS...

...NO MATTER WHO OR WHAT BARRED HER WAY!

STILL, A MISSION IS A MISSION...

AND SO SHE HAD PURLOINED THE ANCIENT PAGE, AMID DARKNESS AND CONFUSION...

IN TRUTH, HOWEVER, SHE HAD BEEN SHOCKED WHEN, STUMBLING MIRE-LADEN FROM SUBTERRANEAN PATHS, SHE HAD FOUND HERSELF CONFRONTED BY CONAN AND HIS PIRATE-QUEEN PARAMOUR!

...ONLY TO SEE, SHORTLY THEREAFTER, THE SPITEFUL BÊLIT RIDING OFF TOWARD THE NIGHT-SHROUDED WHARFS...

...ON SONJA'S VERY OWN HORSE!

ONE OF TEN PAGES IN THIS EDITION NOT SCANNED FROM THE ORIGINAL ART.

CONAN HAD BEEN THERE, TOO-- AND HOW SHE HAD LONGED, IN HER WAY, TO FACE HIM-- TO GET IT ALL OVER WITH, ONE WAY OR THE OTHER!

BUT, THERE WAS HER MISSION... HER PROMISE TO GRIM KARANTHES...!

YET, IF SONJA THINKS CONAN AND BÊLIT WILL ACCEPT DEFEAT-- THEN SHE KNOWS LITTLE OF EITHER.

FOR, EVEN NOW, THEY ARE RACING ON BORROWED STEEDS INTO THE ARGOSSEAN COUNTRYSIDE...

...LITTLE NOTING THE DUSKY-HUED, DARK-ROBED FIGURE WHICH WATCHES THEIR GOING FROM IMPENETRABLE SHADOWS...

...ALL THE WHILE SMILING HIS INSCRUTABLE SMILE.

NEITHER THEY, NOR RED SONJA HERSELF, WOULD KNOW THIS MAN BY SIGHT.

HOWEVER, IT WAS HE WHO SENT FIRST JACKAL-MEN, THEN HUMAN CROCODILES AFTER SONJA, TO ABORT HER QUEST FOR KARANTHES.

THUS FAR, HIS PLANS HAVE PROVED INEFFECTUAL-- AND EVEN NOW, THE PAGE HE COVETS MOVES NORTHWARD TOWARD A RENDEZVOUS WITH STYGIA-BORN KARANTHES.

BUT, THE WAY NORTH IS LONG AND FRAUGHT WITH PERIL...

AND THERE ARE MORE WAYS THERE THAN OVERLAND BY ROAD.

ONE OF TEN PAGES IN THIS EDITION NOT SCANNED FROM THE ORIGINAL ART.

WITH MEASURED TREAD, HE MAKES HIS WAY THRU THE CROOKED STREETS, THE FEW LATE-NIGHT WALKERS SHUNNING HIM LIKE A VERY PLAGUE.

FOR, THIS SEA-PORT LAND LOVES NOT STYGIANS, WHO HAVE WARRED WITH ARGOS BEFORE -- AND MAY AGAIN.

THERE ARE OTHER REASONS, TOO. GOOD REASONS...

...AS THEY WOULD KNOW, IF THEY SAW THE MAN SCANT MOMENTS LATER IN HIS OWN LOWLY QUARTERS -- BEGINNING ARCANE PREPARATIONS FOR AN ANCIENT RITUAL WHICH, THOUGH NOT AS POTENT PERHAPS AS ONE FROM THE BOOK OF SKELOS, STILL HAS ITS OWN DREAD PURPOSES.

AT LAST, ALL ABLUTIONS DONE, THE NAMELESS STYGIAN SPEAKS, IN A HOARSE WHISPER--

ZOGTARR LAMMAT SABBATAN!--!

...AND IN A TONGUE LONG FORGOTTEN, SAVE BY THE SINISTER PRIESTS OF THE SERPENT-GOD SET, WHO STRIDE WITH BLACK CANDLES ALONG THE DARK BANKS OF THE WRITHING RIVER STYX...

TUBLAT R'LYEH! TUBLAT YUGGOTH!

TUBLAT SET!

BUT, SINCE SUCH AS WE CAN LITTLE COMPREHEND WHAT WE SEE AND HEAR AMID THESE SHIFTING SHADOWS...

...WE'D BEST TURN OUR EYES TOWARD THE **ARGOSSEAN ROAD** WHICH WINDS, SNAKELIKE, UP THE NEARBY **HILLS**...

...AND WHERE **SONJA**, OUTCAST FROM EAST OF VILAYET, IS BEING PURSUED THIS TIME BY **WEST-BORN** DEMONS!

CONAN, ALSO CALLED **AMRA**-- AND **BÊLIT**, BORN IN SHEM YET REARED SOUTH OF KUSH!

WE'LL CATCH HER **YET**, MY BARBARIAN! WE'RE **CLOSING IN!**

AYE-- BECAUSE HER HORSE WAS **TIRED**, WHILE OURS ARE **FRESH**.

BUT, STAND **ASIDE** WHEN WE OVERTAKE HER! IT'S **I** WHO'LL-- **CROM!**

WHAT'S THAT **SOUND**-- LIKE THE ROARING OF A **LION**--OR OF GREAT **BREAKERS**?

ROCKSLIDE!

REIN IN YOUR **MOUNT**, WOMAN!

THOUGH SHE CAN STAND ON THE DECK OF A **SHIP** AS WELL AS ANY **MAN**, BÊLIT IS LESS ACCUSTOMED TO SITTING ON THE BACK OF A **HORSE**...

THUS, WHEN IT **REARS** IN SUDDEN, SENSELESS **FRIGHT**--

OUHHHH~!

--IT TAKES HER **LOVER** AND **FIRST MATE** TO SAVE HER--

--SO THAT, EVEN AS SHE SCRAMBLES GRACELESSLY ONTO HIS SADDLE, SHE **VOWS**:

THAT'S **ANOTHER** DAGGER-SLICE I OWE THAT HYRKANIAN **HARRIDAN!**

EASY! WE'RE **SAFE** NOW--

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

BUT, I'D SWEAR BY ALL THE GODS FROM *AESGAARD* TO *KUSH* THAT THE SLIDE WAS NO MERE *CHANCE!*

YET, NO *MAN* STOOD UP ABOVE, TO HAVE *CAUSED* IT.

DO YOU *THINK--?*

AS LITTLE AS *POSSIBLE*, GIRL! IT INTERFERES WITH MY GOOD *ANIMAL INSTINCTS.*

ALL I KNOW IS, NOW THAT WE'RE *PAST* THE ROCK-SLIDE, WE'D BETTER PROCEED WITH *CARE...*

...THOUGH IT OBVIOUSLY *WON'T* BE *SIDE BY SIDE!*

DAMN! I WISH WE'D HAD TIME FOR *TARA* OR *YUSEF* TO WARN US ABOUT THIS *FORK* IN THE ROAD!

WELL, WE *DIDN'T*. SO WE MUST *PART COMPANY* FOR A TIME, MY BARBARIAN--

--AND *ERLIK* HELP THAT RED-HAIRED WITCH, IF *THIS* BE THE PATH THAT LEADS TO HER!

*FOR, THOUGH BÊLIT HAS COME TO MEAN **MUCH** TO HIM THESE PAST MONTHS, STILL HE AND **RED SONJA**, TOO, WERE ONCE COMPANIONS IN PERIL.*

CONAN, FOR HIS PART, SAYS NOTHING--JUST AS HE DID NOT WHEN HE SAW SONJA'S TRACKS.

*BECAUSE OF THIS, HE INWARDLY VOWS TO GIVE HER A CHANCE TO **SURRENDER** THE PURLOINED PAGE...*

*...ALL THE WHILE **KNOWING** WHAT HER SHARP-TONGUED **ANSWER** WILL BE!*

AS FOR SONJA: SHE, TOO, KNOWS THAT THE UN-EXPECTED ROCK-SLIDE WAS NO COINCIDENCE.

SHE SEES KARANTHES' GAUNT HAND IN IT... THAT, AND HIS GLOWING IBIS-STAFF.

AND SHE IS ANGRY-- FOR, SHE WISHES TO AVOID SLAYING THE CIMMERIAN, IF SHE CAN.

BRIEFLY, SHE WONDERS IF CONAN WOULD FEEL AS COMFORTABLE WORKING FOR A MAGIC-SPINNING PRIEST AS SHE DOES.

PROBABLY NOT...

FOR, HE IS MERELY A SEMI-CIVILIZED SAVAGE, BORN AND REARED TO THE BLADE--

-- AND DOES NOT OWE HIS PROWESS, EVEN IN PART, TO AN ANGELIC VISION SUCH AS APPEARED TO HER!*

OR DID SHE TRULY SEE SUCH A THING? SHE'S NEVER BEEN CERTAIN...

STILL, ALL THAT IS FAR BEHIND HER NOW-- MUCH FARTHER, SHE SUSPECTS, THAN CONAN AND HIS MISANTHROPIC LADY-LOVE.

* AS SEEN IN SONJA'S ORIGIN, KULL AND THE BARBARIANS #3. -- ROY.

LADY-LOVE: THE WORD SONJA REALLY CALLS HER, MENTALLY, IS NOT NEARLY SO POLITE.

JUST THEN-- NOT MANY HOURS' RIDE FROM MESSANTIA, YET DOWN A PATH FEW MEN TRAVEL OF THEIR OWN FREE WILL-- SHE COMES UPON THE APPOINTED PLACE:

WHAT WAS IT KARANTHES CALLED IT?

THE NEST OF THE SACRED IBIS.

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

THE PLACID, UNSPEAKING **ACOLYTES**-- MOST OF THEM OF **STYGIAN** BIRTH, BY THE LOOK OF THEM -- SEEM TO PAY HER **NO MIND**, THOUGH SHE IS OBVIOUSLY THE **ONLY WOMAN** IN THE MONASTERY.

AND THE **MAIN TEMPLE** AT ITS CENTER IS PRECISELY AS KARANTHES **SAID** IT WOULD BE...

...DOWN TO THE TWO TALL **KUSHITE GUARDS** AT ITS DOOR.

KARANTHES?

WELCOME, MY CHILD, TO THE SOUTHERNMOST ***TEMPLE OF IBIS.***

YOU CAN'T HAVE ***STOOD*** THERE, WITHOUT SLEEP, FOR THE SEVERAL DAYS SINCE ***LAST*** WE MET.

YOU KNEW, THEN, THE EXACT ***HOUR*** AND ***MOMENT*** I WOULD ARRIVE-- BUT ***HOW?***

THE IBIS IS A ***BIRD*** AS WELL AS A ***GOD***, SONJA OF HYRKANIA...

...AND ITS SOUL CAN GIVE ***WINGS*** TO AN OLD MAN'S ***SPIRIT.***

YOU ARE AS MUCH A *HUMAN RIDDLE* AS EVER, OLD MAN.

A USEFUL MASK FOR BOTH *PRIESTS* AND *SLEIGHT-OF HAND MAGICIANS*, MY CHILD.

BUT-- I SEE YOU'VE BROUGHT THE *PAGE*. MAY I--?

IN A *MOMENT*.

I DID *NOT* APPRECIATE YOUR USING YOUR STORE OF MAGIC TO NEARLY *KILL* MY PURSUERS, KARANTHES!

I FIGHT MY *OWN* BATTLES.

AND I *MINE*. BUT ARE YOU POSITIVE *I* CAUSED THAT ROCKSLIDE?

I *AM* -- OR ELSE YOU'D *NOT* KNOW IT WAS A ROCKSLIDE I *MEANT*.

AND I *KNEW* YOU KNEW--OR I WOULD *NOT* HAVE MENTIONED IT.

NOW, THE *PAGE*, IF YOU PLEASE?

HERE-- AND I'M GLAD TO BE *RID* OF IT!

ALL I WANT IS THE *PAYMENT* YOU PROMISED-- A *JEWEL* THE SIZE OF THE ONE WHICH *VANISHED* FROM MY HAND BEFORE.

ARE *THESE* COFFIN-LOOKING THINGS YOUR *TREASURE-TROVES*?

IN A SENSE THEY *ARE*...

FOR, THEY ARE *INDEED* STONE COFFINS-- *SARCOPHAGI*, EACH OF WHICH CONTAINS THE REMAINS OF A FORMER *HIGH PRIEST OF IBIS* SUCH AS MYSELF.

THE WORSHIPPERS OF IBIS *FLED* WITH THEM, WHEN *THOTH-AMON* AND HIS ILK DROVE US OUT-- BUT, THAT IS *ANOTHER* STORY.

AND ONE THAT DOESN'T *INTEREST* ME MUCH.

BUT, ONLY *SIX* SARCOPHAGI-- FOR SUCH AN *ANCIENT* GOD'S PRIESTS?

EACH TIME A *NEW* PRIEST DIES, THE BONES OF THE *LONGEST INTERRED* ARE REMOVED TO YONDER *CHAMBER OF SKULLS*.

THERE HAVE BEEN *HUNDREDS* SUCH, FOR THE WORSHIP OF *IBIS*-- AS MUCH AS THAT OF *SET*-- GOES BACK *UNTOLD AGES*.

YOU SEE?

THAT SKELETON HOLDING THE *DOUBLE AXE*-- WAS *HE* A HIGH PRIEST, TOO?

AH, THAT WAS FAITHFUL *KEFTU*, WHO DIED WITHIN LIVING MEMORY, IN OUR *NEMEDIAN EXILE*.

HIS FOREMOST DESIRE AND *FINAL REQUEST* WAS THAT, THOUGH A MERE *MINOR PRIEST* SUCH AS THOSE OUTSIDE, HE MIGHT *GUARD* THE CHAMBER OF SKULLS EVEN AFTER HIS *DEATH*...

AND *SO*, IN HIS OWN WAY, HE *DOES*--

AS YOU WOULD *DISCOVER* IF YOU SOUGHT TO *DISTURB* THOSE BONES.

NOTHING COULD BE *FURTHER* FROM MY MIND.

IF YOU'VE SEEN QUITE ENOUGH OF *DEAD* PRIESTS, THEN...

I *HAVE!*

...ONE WHO STILL *LIVES* SHALL PAY YOU THAT WHICH YOU HAVE *EARNED*.

MEANWHILE, TWO GIANT KUSHITES ARE ABOUT TO LEARN THAT, WHEN YOU ARE GUARDING A TEMPLE AGAINST A CIMMERIAN--

--YOU WOULD BE ADVISED TO GROW *EYES* ON THE TOP OF YOUR *HEAD!*

ALL RIGHT, SONJA...

I'LL HAVE THAT *PAGE* NOW.

I SEE I SHOULD HAVE BEEN MORE *WATCHFUL*, EVEN AFTER THE ROCK-SLIDE.

CONAN-- *HERE!?*

I WOULDN'T KNOW. THE *PAGE*, PLEASE.

NO, BY IBIS! YOU MAY *NOT* HAVE IT! THE FATE OF *WORLDS*--

ARGUMENT IS *USELESS*, KARANTHES; I *KNOW* HIM.

THEN *COMPLETE* YOUR OBLIGATION TO ME -- AND WIN THE *JEWEL* YOU COVET--

--BY *DEFENDING* MY ACQUISITION FROM THIS UN-COUTH *SAVAGE!*

YOU *HEARD* HIM, CONAN.

I HAVE NO DESIRE TO *RUN YOU THRU*...

SO GET *OUT* OF HERE-- *NOW!*

CONAN'S *RESPONSE* IS AS SIMPLE, AS NATURAL, AS *EXPECTED* AS SONJA'S *OWN* WOULD HAVE BEEN:

--TO WHICH SONJA *RESPONDS* IN KIND!

CONFOUND YOU, CIMMERIAN!

WHY DIDN'T YOU JUST STAY SAFELY OUT TO *SEA*--

A HAND LAID ON A *SWORD HILT* -- AND A GLOWER FULL OF SULLEN MENACE--

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

--AND OUT OF MY BLADE'S PATH?

FOR THIS, THERE IS NO ANSWER--

--SAVE THE SOFT WHOOSH OF SLICED CANDLES WHICH MIGHT AS WELL HAVE BEEN LIMBS--

--AND THE STRONG UPSWEEP OF A SWORD-ARM--

--WHICH BRINGS A STEELY CLANG!

THEN, AS THE RAGING BARBARIAN MOMENTARILY TAKES THE OFFENSIVE--

--THE LITHE AMAZON LEAPS ON-TO THE ALTAR OF IBIS--

--THERE TO MAKE A STAND MORE WRATHFUL THAN RELIGIOUS!

I WARN YOU, CONAN -- OR AMRA -- OR WHATEVER YOU CALL YOUR-SELF THESE DAYS--

DON'T COUNT OVERMUCH ON OUR OLD TIES TO SAVE YOUR BRONZED HIDE!

--AND YOU'LL NOT STAND IN MY WAY!

BY ERLIK, I WANT THAT GEM--

YOU'RE A HELLER, SONJA-- YOU ALWAYS WERE--

BUT, *GOOD* AS YOU ARE, *YOUR* SWORD-ARM'S STILL LESS STRONG THAN *MINE*--

OR ARE YOU SAYING *YOU* COULD DO *THIS*??

NO-- BUT THEN, WHY SHOULD I *HAVE* TO--

-- WHEN THERE ARE *SUBTLER* WAYS TO ACHIEVE MY ENDS?

SUCH IS SONJA'S SKILL THAT THE VERY **LAMPS** *OVERHEAD BECOME* **WEAPONS**--

--SEEMING MERE **IRRITANTS** FOR A MOMENT, AS **HOT OIL** FLECKS CONAN'S HAIR AND SKIN, YET DOES LITTLE **HARM**--

BUT THEN, AS THE SNARLING HYRKANIAN **RENEWS** *HER VIGOROUS ATTACK--*

--HIS **FOOT** SLIPS IN A SMALL **POOL** OF FRESH-SPILLED OIL--

--AND THE BATTLE **CEASES COLD!**

ALL RIGHT, BARBARIAN-- I *HAVE* YOU!

WELL THEN, WHAT ARE YOU *WAITING* FOR, WOMAN?

I'D SCARCELY HAVE KILLED *YOU* FOR A MERE SCRAP OF *PARCHMENT*-- BUT, IF THAT'S WHAT YOU'VE **SUNK** TO, THESE DAYS--

DO IT, AND BE *DAMNED* TO YOU!

NO NEED. I GIVE YOU **QUARTER**-- FOR OLD TIMES' SAKE.

PICK UP YOUR OVERRATED CARCASS AND HAUL IT **OUT** OF HERE--

--WHILE I'M STILL FEELING *MERCIFUL!*

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

CROM CURSE YOU, GIRL! I NEVER SAID I SURRENDERED!

I'VE BEEN TAKING IT TOO EASY WITH YOU, THAT'S ALL! ON GUARD!

WHY, YOU ARROGANT--!

ONCE AGAIN, SONJA'S ALLITERATIVE EPITHET IS BEST UNREPEATED...

NOW, BENEATH KARANTHES' TENSE GAZE, STEEL RINGS ON STEEL IN THE TEMPLE OF IBIS--

AND IT WOULD TAKE A SAGE OF THE EAST TO PICK WHICH IS THE BETTER SWORDSMAN!

YET, EVENTUALLY, THE VERY LENGTH OF THE BATTLE-- SOMETHING NEW FOR THE WOMAN WARRIOR-- BEGINS TO TELL ON HER.

SUDDENLY, HIS SWORD IS PRESSING HERS BACK--AND DOWN--AND AWAY--

AND THOUGH SHE FIGHTS BACK WITH A FURY BIRTHED IN HELL--

--CONAN'S SUPERIOR SIZE AND STRENGTH AT LAST HOLD SWAY!

HAH! NOW THE BOOT IS ON THE OTHER FOOT, GIRL!

THE DEVIL WITH YOU! IF YOU THINK I'LL THROW DOWN MY SWORD-- OR PLEAD FOR MERCY--!

NOT FOR A MOMENT.

BUT, CIMMERIANS PAY THEIR DEBTS-- AND THIS WAS MINE.

WE ARE EVEN NOW, SONJA. BUT I STILL WANT THAT PAGE!

AND THE NEXT TIME I GET PAST YOUR GUARD--

CONAN DOESN'T FINISH-- PERHAPS BECAUSE HE'S NOT CERTAIN WHAT HE WOULD SAY.

AS FOR **RED SONJA**: SHE SPEAKS MOST ELOQUENTLY WITH HER **BROADSWORD**--

--FORCING HER BLACK-MANED FOE **BACKWARD** WITH A SUDDEN, SLASHING **ASSAULT**--

--INTO THE **CHAMBER OF SKULLS!**

BEWARE, INFIDELS!

IF YOU DISTURB THE SKELETON OF **KEFTU**--!

BUT, NEITHER COMBATANT CAN **HEAR** HIS WORDS OF WARNING.

TOO LOUD IN THEIR EARS ARE THE CLANGING OF **SWORDS**, AND THE CLATTERING OF **BONES**--

--**INCLUDING** THOSE OF THE LONG-DEAD **ACOYLYTE!**

ANOTHER SOUND--ALSO UNHEARD BY THEM--MINGLES WITH THOSE IN THE CHAMBER:

A SIBILANT **HISSING**, AS A GREAT **SERPENTINE FORM** SLITHERS FROM **BENEATH** WHERE HAD SAT THE NOW-SCATTERED BONES OF **KEFTU**...

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

BUT, THAT WHICH IS NOT HEARD-- MAY STILL BE FELT--!

CROM'S DEVILS! THE GRAND-FATHER OF ALL VIPERS!

IGNORANT BARBARIAN! PYTHONS HAVE NO FANGS!

TELL THAT--TO THE OTHERS HE'S CRUSHED AND BITTEN, GIRL!

THERE...! THAT'S HALF THE JOB DONE-- KNOCKED HIM YOUR WAY!

NOW STRIKE, CURSE YOU--

COLOR: NO RED IN SUNKIST BLOOD

STRIKE!

HE'S STRUCK!

THANKS. PERHAPS WE MAKE--A BETTER TEAM-- THAN WE DO FOEMEN.

AYE! FORGET THE JEWEL, KARANTHES!

WE MUST COME TO TERMS-- WITH MY COMRADE CONAN!

FOOLS! THIS IS NO TIME TO SPEAK OF PACTS!

WHAT? NOW LOOK, KARANTHES-- NO USE TRYING TO DIVIDE US AGAIN. WE--

THAT IS NOT WHAT I MEAN!

COME-- LOOK ABOVE!

ABOVE? WHAT DO YOU-- ISHTAR!

HOLY MITRA!

EVEN AS THEY SPEAK, A GIGANTIC, ALL-ENGULFING SHADOW FALLS OVER THE INTERIOR OF THE IBIS-TEMPLE:

THE SHADOW OF A CREATURE WHICH MIGHT BE A GIANT BAT--

--OR ELSE ONE OF THE MIGHTY PRE-CATACLYSMIC LIZARD-HAWKS OF WHICH THE ANCIENTS TOLD--

--EXCEPT THAT IT HAS A HUMAN FACE--

--THE FACE OF A HOODED STYGIAN, NOW THIRSTY FOR TRIUMPH -- FOR THE PAGE FROM THE BOOK OF SKELOS--

--AND FOR BLOOD!

THIS TALE OF TALES CONCLUDES IN THE PAGES OF CONAN #68--ON SALE SOON!

DAY OF HEROES • NIGHT OF DEATH!

FRANK THORNE'S RED SONJA®

COVER GALLERY

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